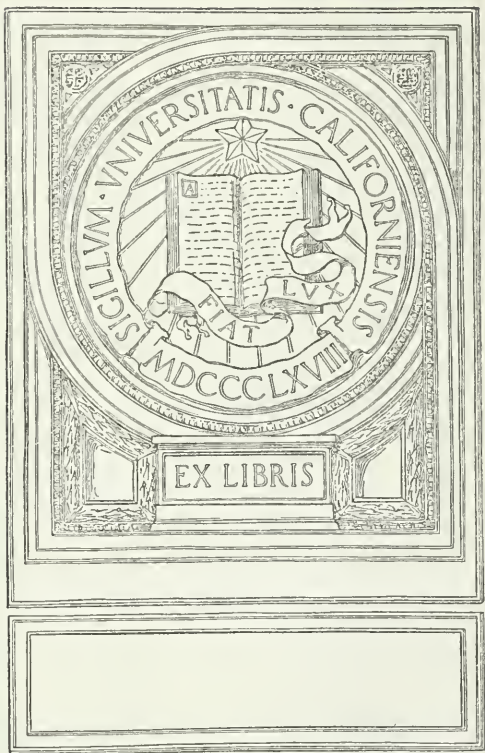


THE LONE PATROL

BY
J. FINNEMORE





THE LONE PATROL

To Theodore
from

Jessy

April 16. 1916.



Dick hung his arms round Jerry's waist and dragged his friend from the saddle.

THE LONE PATROL

By

JOHN FINNEMORE

Author of 'Teddy Lester's Chums,' 'His First Term,' 'Three School Chums,'
'Foray and Fight,' &c.

WITH SIX COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS

by

W. Rainey

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THE LONE PATROL.

CHAPTER I.

BUSHED.

‘**M**Y Colonial!’ murmured Dick Barry to himself as he looked up from the paper he held in his hand; ‘what fun it must be to live in a township and have a good time with the rest of the mob! Wouldn’t I just about chip in with a patrol if I could only run up against one!’

He sighed and looked again at a picture of a troop of Boy Scouts in an old illustrated newspaper. Dick had heard of the Boy Scout movement; but never before had he seen any picture of Scouts in their rig, and he scanned it again and again and pronounced it ‘budgery,’ which meant good and very good.

‘Too much to wear here, though, just at present,’ chuckled Dick, and looked up again, this time to glance longingly at the water-bag which hung in the shade of the veranda of the big wooden hut he called home.

But water was far too precious to be drunk freely, and he licked his dry lips and returned to the study of the paper which Boona Bill, the stock-rider, had pulled out of his swag and left at Ballamoola that very morning.

Ballamoola stood on a little ridge above a wide creek which ran to join one of the chief rivers of northern

Queensland. That is to say, the creek ran when there was water in it; but there had not been a drop on view for more than four months at the moment when Dick was deep in his newspaper, and the bed stretched from bank to bank, white and dry and shining in the tremendous glare which poured down from the brassy heavens above. The heat was terrific. Dick was clothed in a light and airy costume of an old cabbage-tree hat and a pair of torn trousers, and he found it an ample rig-out. He had a shirt, it is true; but he had shed that, and it lay on the ground beside him. The sweat stood in glistening beads on his lean, brown ribs and long, muscular arms, and altogether it was pretty warm even for a December day at Ballamoola.

Again Dick looked up at the water-bag, but only to reflect how nice it would be when the time came round to have another drink. For you did not drink water freely at Ballamoola at that moment. The nearest water-hole was three miles away, and Dick himself had hauled the family supply that morning over the burning sands of the dried-up creek, and water was scarce and very precious. Just below the house there was a big hollow in the river-bed which had contained a large pool; and in the belief that this pool never went dry, Ballamoola had been built on the ridge above. But this year the pool had petered out, and if the water-hole below went too they would be in a cheerful fix at the little station.

The family at Ballamoola consisted of three persons—Dick's father and mother and himself. Mr Barry had been for years a prospector, but he had met with little or no luck till he made a small find of alluvial gold in a creek at no great distance from his present abode. With this windfall he had bought the run on which they now lived, and had become a small squatter. At the present moment he was out on the run with the two blackboys he employed, driving the cattle to a distant water-hole; for if the thirsty beasts

had been allowed to drink at the small pool which supplied the station, it would soon have been all over with that supply.

Suddenly Dick raised his head and listened intently.

'Somebody's coming through the scrub,' said the boy to himself, and he fixed his keen eyes on a thick patch of low trees lying at some distance behind the station. Through this patch of trees ran a path, and now a woman came in sight, hurrying along at a speed which caused Dick to open eyes and mouth in amazement.

'Running!' said Dick. 'My Colonial! Running in this weather! Why, it's Mrs Ross;,' and Dick hurried into his shirt and sprang to his feet. Then he ran to meet the running woman.

'Why, Mrs Ross,' cried the boy, 'what's wrong? Ease up a bit. Gi' me the baby,' for Mrs Ross was carrying a child; 'you'll kill yerself tearin' along in this weather.'

The woman looked up, and a cry burst from her baked lips, and her eyes flashed from the gray, exhausted face, where sweat had streaked lines across the dust of the track which powdered her from head to foot.

'Oh Dick,' she cried, 'Jim's bushed! My man's bushed!'

'Bushed!' Dick whistled softly and caught the heavy baby from its mother's arms, and both hurried towards the house.

As they approached it Dick's mother came to the door, and at sight of Mrs Barry the other woman raised her hopeless cry again. 'Oh Mrs Barry, Jim's bushed! My man's bushed! I've run over here to you. I'd nowhere else to go.'

'Of course you've come here,' cried Mrs Barry, hastening to meet her and lead her into the shade of the veranda. 'Sit down and take a drink of water. You must be nigh on dead comin' through that bakin' mulga scrub this dreadful

day. And don't you take on about your man. He'll be found yet and be fetched back to ye safe and sound, never fear for that.'

Mrs Barry and Dick soothed the poor exhausted creature and gave her drink, and listened to the tale which she poured out. But as she spoke both mother and son could not help a very grave look coming into their eyes, for they knew the country better than Mrs Ross, and saw that the poor woman's fears had a terrible foundation.

Ross was a selector, and a very near neighbour as distances go 'Out Back,' for his station was only some six miles from the Barrys'. He had not been in that part of the country more than twelve months; for he and his wife had come up from a coast-town, where Ross had been in business and failed. He had gone out the morning before on horseback to see if any water was left in a distant water-hole, for the creek which passed their house was drying up fast and they would soon be short of water for their stock. He left Homewood, as their station was called, about seven o'clock, and at a little after eleven the horse trotted up to the place riderless. Mrs Ross had at once been filled with alarm, and had sent an old black-fellow who worked for them to follow up the tracks and see what had happened to her husband.

The day passed and night fell, and no news came. The poor woman had spent the night watching in great fear; but it was not till another day was several hours old that the black-fellow returned. He had entirely failed to find his master, and in her despair Mrs Ross had hurried across the six miles of burning track which lay between Homewood and Ballamoola to tell her friends of her distress.

'Your blackboys are good trackers, aren't they?' she concluded. 'I've heard Jim say so several times. Oh, won't you let them find my husband?'

'First-rate trackers,' mumbled Dick, while Mrs Barry bit her lip and looked dreadfully worried.

'Where are they?' cried Mrs Ross, and this cornered both mother and son, for they knew that the answer would dash the poor woman's hopes to the ground.

'They're on the run,' said Mrs Barry. 'They're out with my husband, looking for water. Tom thinks there may be water for the cattle in some of those ranges out west there.'

'When will they be back?'

Both Dick and his mother were silent for a moment. This silence frightened Mrs Ross, for she suspected its meaning, and she repeated the question in a still more anxious tone.

'I'm very sorry, Mrs Ross,' said Dick's mother, 'but I can't tell you. Tom's going to search till he hits on water somewhere; and it may be two or three days before they are back.'

Mrs Ross gave a groan of despair. Two or three days! She knew very well that if two or three days must pass before the search could be commenced, her husband would never be found alive in the awful, waterless wastes into which he had wandered.

'All right, Mrs Ross; cheer up!' cried the boy. 'I'll go and look for him. I reckon I'll smell out his tracks a bit better than old Bungo Sam.' The latter was the black-fellow who had tried and failed.

Mrs Ross raised her head and looked at Dick, and then looked at Dick's mother.

'You go into the scrub alone, Dick?' she faltered; but her eyes were fixed imploringly on Mrs Barry's face.

Mrs Barry was a bushwoman from her birth, and knew well the dangers of such a journey; but she smiled into her son's brave eyes, and said quietly, 'Yes, Mrs Ross; Dick shall go if he wishes. His father says he's a born bushman. P'r'aps your man isn't far off, anyhow.'

From this point there was little talking and no fuss. Dick ran to get his pony from the paddock, and his mother

quickly put some tucker together and filled a big water-bag. Within twenty minutes he was riding along the scrub-track, and his mother stood watching him until he had disappeared among the trees ; then she went back to Mrs Ross.

‘Come on, Whitesock,’ said Dick, running his hand along the glossy black neck of his pony ; ‘we’ve got to bustle a bit, warm as it is ;’ and he turned his right toe in and touched Whitesock just behind the elbow. Whitesock understood this signal—he had never known whip or spur in his life—and broke into a swift, easy canter which threw the miles behind him in short order. Dick’s road ran for five miles through the scrub, then through a grove of big timber and out on to the plain where the Rosses had taken up land. The hut stood beside a bush-track, and on a log at the rear of the house sat Bungo Sam, his legs stretched before him and his back against the wall, comfortably asleep in the heat of the broiling day.

CHAPTER II.

DICK FINDS A COMPANION.

AS Dick rode up to the hut he caught sight of a horse-man approaching from the opposite direction, and they gained the front of the house almost together.

‘Hallo, Dick!’ said the new-comer, a tall, bronzed man of forty-five; ‘is that you?’

‘Yes, Mr Carew,’ replied Dick, recognising a big squatter who owned a wide run called Narana far to the west of Ballamoola. ‘How are you?’

‘First-rate,’ said Mr Carew. ‘How’s everybody at Ballamoola?’

‘Very well, thank you,’ replied Dick. ‘How are Tom and Arthur?’ These were Mr Carew’s sons, and old friends of Dick’s.

‘They’re all right,’ said the father. ‘Tom’s down in Sydney at present, and Arthur’s over at Narana. You must come over and take a spell with him. He’s dying to see you.’

‘I should like to come ever so much,’ said Dick; ‘but I didn’t know you’d come up to Narana.’

‘Only came up last Friday,’ replied Mr Carew; ‘and now I’m jogging over to Wilmoora, where I hope to pick up a few station-hands, as I’m rather short for the stock at Narana. But what place is this? It’s new to me. I haven’t been this way for years;’ and the squatter glanced round the little station.

‘It belongs to some people named Ross, and they’re in a big fix,’ replied Dick. ‘I’ve come over to lend a hand. Ross is bushed.’

‘Bushed!’ said Mr Carew. ‘Well, can’t he find his way

back? Is he a Jackeroo?' A Jackeroo is a man new to the country, a tenderfoot.

'Well, he isn't exactly a Jackeroo,' replied Dick; 'but it comes to much the same. He's a Queenslander, but he's been living in a town. He's no bushman.' Dick related the story Mrs Ross had told.

'Then he's in a mighty queer fix,' said Mr Carew, 'and if there's no water with him he's got to be found pretty quick this weather.'

'That's the worst of it,' said Dick; 'the water-bag was fastened to the saddle when the horse came home. I'm going to smell out his tracks if I can.'

'By George, Dick! you're rather a young hand for a big job like this,' cried Mr Carew, looking at the boy with pursed lips. 'Nobody else been after him?'

'Their black-fellow, Bungo Sam, has had a try,' said Dick; 'but he couldn't do anything.'

'And you're going to try where a black-fellow has failed!' cried Mr Carew. 'Dick, my boy, be careful. Don't chuck one life after another.'

'Oh, that's all right, Mr Carew,' drawled Dick in his gentle voice. 'I don't take any account of Bungo Sam's failing. He's only a "wood-and-water Joey," after all.'

'Oh,' said Mr Carew, and nodded. He quite understood. A 'wood-and-water Joey' means a black-fellow who has long been employed on odd jobs about a station, and having got quite out of touch with his old savage life, has often lost much of his bush-cunning in tracking and hunting.

Dick now raised his voice and shouted to Bungo Sam, and the old black-fellow came shambling forward. He was ordered to bring Mr Ross's horse out, and when the animal was fetched from the paddock Dick got down and looked carefully at his shoes, then asked a few questions of the 'boy,' for every black-fellow is called a boy even if he looks as old as Methuselah.

'That's the track,' said Dick, nodding to the north-west, where a wide, parched, sandy plain stretched away to a far-off dusty belt of forest. He sprang into his saddle, turned his bridle-hand, and Whitesock stepped briskly away.

'Well, I'll see what I can do, Mr Carew,' he said.

'And I'll see what you can do, Dick,' said the squatter, turning his horse and sending it alongside Whitesock. 'I can't go on my road and leave a poor chap bushed without lending a hand, you know.'

Dick smiled and nodded, and the two rode across the paddock and entered upon the plain and put their horses to a gallop, for the tracks were perfectly clear.

'My word, Dick!' said Mr Carew, 'that's a clipping pony you're on. What does he stand?'

'Just on fourteen-two,' replied Dick. 'Isn't he a beauty?'

'Rather,' said Mr Carew. 'Where did you pick him up, and how old is he?'

'Bred him ourselves,' replied Dick. 'He's been mine since he was foaled. Father gave him to me, and he's rising five.'

'By George! he'd fetch a tidy figure for polo,' said Mr Carew. 'Ever think of selling him, Dick?'

'No, Mr Carew,' said the boy, shaking his head; 'nothing is going to part me and Whitesock in a hurry.'

'A jolly good name for him, too,' said Mr Carew. 'There isn't a white hair on him except that sock.'

Chatting thus, they crossed the plain at a steady gallop, Dick a little in front, his eyes on the track. As they approached the forest, which was of big timber, they steadied up, for the ground became harder and the marks fainter.

'P'raps the flies will be a bit easier on us under the trees,' said Mr Carew.

And Dick said, 'Hope so,' absently, and watched the track.

It was not because he could not feel the flies that he spoke carelessly, but because his thoughts were on the signs which

he was reading. As for the flies, they could be warranted to make themselves pretty disagreeable to the toughest-skinned animal that ever lived. The air was full of them, and they made madly for the eyes, so that Dick and his companion had to keep one hand busy wiping away the blinding sweat and the furious flies.

At the edge of the timber both dismounted, and went forward leading their horses. Under the trees the baked earth, whity-brown and cracked by the heat into all sorts of odd patterns, was hard as a stone and the tracks appeared to die away.

'My word, Dick, where's the track petered out to?' said Mr Carew. 'I never did set up for being much of a bushman, I admit; but it seems to me clean gone.'

'Oh, it's all right, Mr Carew,' drawled Dick, with his quiet smile; 'take a line across to that big gum with the broken branch and watch the grass. It's bent; that's where the horse came across;' and Dick stepped briskly forward.

Sure enough, beyond the big gum they hit on a softer patch, and here were the marks once more as clear as possible. Now Dick followed the line at a sharp walk, and Mr Carew followed Dick, perfectly certain that the boy knew very well what he was about, and content to follow his lead. For three good hours Dick followed up the track, saying, 'Here the horse walked; here he galloped; here he walked again.'

'And was he being ridden, Dick?'

'No,' answered the boy; 'this horse was a free nigger. We haven't come to the spot where Ross and the horse parted company.'

'And then we've got to follow up Ross,' commented Mr Carew. 'By gum, Dick! we sha'n't see our happy homes to-night.'

'Very likely we shall have to camp,' replied the boy.

'Let's get up and trot a bit. The ground's softer, and the horse cantered here. See the marks.'

'I see 'em,' said Mr Carew and swung himself into his saddle, and they went across a wide natural clearing where a great storm had once made a clean sweep of the forest trees.

On the other side of this clearing Dick reined up White-sock with a sharp exclamation.

'Here we are!' cried the boy. 'Here's the spot where Ross was pitched off. He went flying, too. See where the horse jibbed, and see the marks of Ross's fingers in the sand! My Colonial! that horse spread-eagled him. But he wasn't up to much on a horse; he'd been keeping store most of his time.'

Mr Carew nodded, and read easily, under Dick's guidance, the signs of the accident.

'Did Ross run after the beast?' he asked.

'Not a step,' said Dick. 'I expect he was knocked out for a bit, and when he came round the horse had cleared out of sight.'

The boy dismounted and looked round carefully, then went a few yards forward and called out, 'Here's the track. Ross started home the way he had come, following his own line back.'

Dick hurried swiftly along the double trail, and Mr Carew followed on horseback. For a matter of three miles it was followed easily; then on a patch of stony ground it disappeared suddenly. They divided and took a cast round the patch. Dick was searching the edge of the patch when a loud 'Coo-ee!' rang out from the other side. He looked up and saw Mr Carew beckoning, and across cantered Dick at once.

'I've got it,' cried Mr Carew. 'Here's the track.'

Dick looked at it and whistled. 'This is where he went wrong,' said the boy. 'A jolly likely place, too.'

'Went wrong?' said Mr Carew. 'Who's gone wrong?'

'Why, Ross,' said Dick. 'Don't you see, Mr Carew,

that's only the track of the horse? There's no back-track of Ross alongside it. Ross lost the track of his nag on the stony bit, same as we've done. But Ross never found it again. He's struck off this patch somewhere on his own. He was a lost man from this out.'

'Let's find his line,' said Mr Carew; and the search was resumed. It was Dick's turn to coo-ee this time. He had found the marks of Ross's footsteps. The latter left the patch at a point far from the true track and went straight and steadily on, as if the lost man had made up his mind which was the direct way home. But he was only heading for a wild, uninhabited part of the country.

'Hold fast, Dick,' said Mr Carew as the boy was about to start off anew on Ross's trail. 'I'm as empty as a drum and as dry as a dead branch. Let's have a bit of tucker before we go ahead again.'

'All right, Mr Carew,' said Dick. 'We may as well have a bite, for we've got a long run ahead of us, I fancy. Ross is going strong, by the way he was digging his heels in.'

'Going strong and going wrong, eh?' said Mr Carew.

'That's it,' said Dick, and got cold mutton and damper out of his tucker-bag and munched it swiftly, while Mr Carew ate his sandwiches. Then they both took a drink out of Dick's water-bag, keeping Mr Carew's in reserve; and very sparingly they drank, too, hot as it was, for they knew not when they would strike water again.

There was no water to give the horses, and Dick stroked Whitesock's velvet nose and promised that he should drink his fill at the next water-hole they found, and then they were off again, this time at a canter, for Dick could read the trail easily from the saddle. But within three miles they were down again, and the young bushman was puzzling out the line foot by foot as it wound through thick patches of scrub. Here, where the bush was close, the wanderer had made the most extraordinary twists and turns. He had clearly lost

all sense of direction and had rambled hither and thither, hoping in vain to hit upon some track which would lead him out of the bewildering depths of the scrub. But let him turn and twist how he would, Dick followed steadily and patiently, finding some token of the movements of the lost man at every yard by disturbed twigs, bent grass, broken dead leaves, and dented soil.

CHAPTER III.

THE SEARCH.

MR CAREW was now leading both horses and steering them through the tangle of dead brushwood as well as he could, while Dick, free to devote himself to the trail, followed the marks with crouching body and eyes that searched every inch of the ground and missed nothing.

At last the boy straightened himself and drew a long breath.

‘Well,’ he said softly, kicking a fallen log, ‘Ross took a rest here and had a quiet smoke.’

‘How do you make that out, Dick?’ asked Mr Carew.

‘Dust brushed off the log here; that’s where he sat,’ said Dick. ‘Tobacco-ash here,’ and he pointed out the gray smear in the dust; ‘that’s where he knocked out his pipe; and he sat here some time, for he shuffled his feet more than a bit in the grass;’ and Dick pointed to the short blades of dry, burnt-up brown grass, which looked to Mr Carew like any other patch and no more disturbed.

Mr Carew’s admiration of his companion had been growing for some time; but this beat through the scrub seemed to him little short of wonderful, even accustomed as he was to the feats of black-trackers.

‘My word, Dick,’ he cried, ‘if you’re not the dead finish! I haven’t got a black-fellow who could have worked out the line better. How did you pick their dodges up so quickly?’

‘Not so quickly, Mr Carew,’ smiled Dick. ‘I’ve always had a fancy for bushwork, and our old black has been knocking it into me since I could walk, and then I ain’t a patch on our young black, and he’s about my own age.’

'He's a pretty useful bird at that rate,' chuckled Mr Carew. 'But which way has this confounded rambler mooned off now, Dick?'

'He got up and went straight ahead,' replied Dick, pointing to Ross's track; 'and, my word! he was running.'

'Running?' said Mr Carew. 'What could he be running after?'

'We'll follow up and perhaps we'll see,' said the boy; and they went on as quickly as they could after the marks. But within a hundred yards Ross had fallen to a walk once more, and his track began to wind and turn about in its former bewildered fashion.

Suddenly the track straightened itself, and once more the lost man had begun to hurry forward. Dick looked up and ahead, and understood this time the reason of the haste. The land dipped gently to a gully, and the gully was lined with a belt of dark-leaved trees.

'Hurrah!' shouted Mr Carew. 'See the dark-leaved trees, Dick! That means there's a creek there. Water, by all that's lucky! Up with you! We'll find our lost man there, I'll go bail.'

'I hope so, Mr Carew,' said Dick quietly, bounding into the saddle and setting Whitesock to a gallop.

'I hope so, do you say?' cried Mr Carew. 'Why, the fellow would never be such an idiot as to leave water when once he'd hit on it. Surely he'll have enough sense to stay there till a search-party comes to pick him up?'

'That isn't what I mean, Mr Carew,' said the boy quietly. 'I hope there's water in the bed.'

'Ah, by George, suppose there isn't?' said Mr Carew, and whistled softly. 'It's been a frightful drought.'

They galloped down into the gully by a shelving slope, and the very first thing they saw was a deepish hole scraped in the dry, sandy bed. Not a drop of water was there.

'My word!' murmured Mr Carew, 'this is pretty bad.

Ross scraped that hole. Look at the marks of his fingers ! And scraped it for nothing, by George ! It's as dry as my boot.'

'The creek's given out,' said Dick. 'It's been dry a good bit, too, by the look of things.'

'Which way has he gone, up or down?' said Mr Carew, glancing about him.

'Neither,' said Dick. 'He's pegged straight ahead.'

'That's a rum go,' said Mr Carew. 'Why didn't he keep along the bed of the creek? There'd be a chance of hitting on a water-hole then.'

'He's gone a bit loony, I expect,' said the boy. 'He was very likely feeling a bit queer before he struck on the creek-bed, and then finding no water has given him the last touch.'

Dick glanced up at the sun, which was now swiftly sloping to the west, and Mr Carew knew what was in his mind.

'We sha'n't get him to-night, Dick.'

'No, Mr Carew; that we sha'n't,' said the boy decidedly. 'We must look round and get water for the horses and make a camp here.'

'All right,' said the squatter; 'then you go down and I'll go up, and between us we ought to hit on a water-hole. And we'll meet again on the edge of dark, anyhow. Coo-ee if you find water, and so will I.'

'Right,' said Dick, and they parted at once.

The swift darkness was settling into the gully when Dick returned to the meeting-place. He had gone as fast and as far as he could in the allotted time, but had come upon no trace of water. He had scarce gained the spot where poor Ross had scooped out the hole in vain, when he heard a horse's hoofs and up rode his companion.

'Found water, Dick?'

'No. Have you?'

'Not a sign of it.'

Dick sighed; he was not thinking of himself, but of Whitesock. Still, there was no help for it; nothing now could be done until the morning. So the horses were carefully hobbled and turned loose to browse on the scanty brown grass, and a fire was started and a little tea made in a billy. The searchers drank very sparingly, but Dick's water-bag was emptied. Mr Carew's had not yet been touched, and it was held very carefully in reserve, for who knew when water would be hit upon? and the desperate need of the poor wretch in front had to be kept in mind.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LOSS OF THE WATER-BAG.

THEY slept that night on the warm sand, and half-an-hour before dawn Dick brought up the horses, so that a start could be made as soon as daylight showed.

‘How about breakfast?’ said Dick. ‘I’ve got some mutton and damper left.’

‘Not a bite for me till I’ve had a drink of something,’ said Mr Carew, licking his dry lips, for the night had been baking hot; ‘and how are we going to get hold of that? It’s hardly the ticket to swig at my bottle when it’s all we’ve got left.’

‘We’ll go on for an hour or two again,’ said Dick; ‘perhaps we’ll hit on a water-hole or a creek with a little in it.’

‘All right,’ said his companion; and the search was resumed.

They were not two miles from the dried-up creek when Dick pointed ahead and cried sharply, ‘What’s that?’

An object was lying in the sand before them. They galloped up to it, and found it was a light jacket of merino.

‘Loony, you said, Dick?’ cried Mr Carew; ‘and you’re right, my boy. He’s chucking his clothes away.’

There is one sure sign that the thirst-madness has seized on a man, and that is the stripping off and throwing away of his clothes, and this jacket was the first article which had been cast aside by the unlucky Ross.

Dick got off his horse and carefully examined the coat, then paid particular attention to the tracks.

‘We’ll get him soon,’ said the boy. ‘He’s beginning to stagger as he goes.’

For two miles again the tracks were easily followed ; then came a stretch of stony soil where Dick had to work his way with his nose almost on the ground. Mr Carew dismounted and led the horses on foot, for his own animal was so restless that he could manage it better in that way. The squatter was riding a powerful chestnut gelding, and the animal, naturally of a fiery and impatient temper, was now almost beside itself with heat and flies and thirst. It snatched impatiently at the bit ; it reared ; it jibbed ; and Mr Carew had all his work cut out to keep it in hand. Luckily Whitesock was as quiet as the other was wild, or the squatter could not have led both.

Half-way across this stony patch a most awkward and threatening accident took place. Dick was a little ahead of Mr Carew and the horses, and his quick eye, which missed nothing, caught sight of a movement in the dust at a spot which he had just passed.

‘Look out, Mr Carew!’ yelled Dick. ‘Jump back—quick!’

The squatter obeyed upon the moment, and none too soon, for he had been about to set his foot upon a spot where a death-adder, that most deadly of snakes, lay sunning itself in the dust. Loosing the bridle of the horses for a moment, Mr Carew snatched the whip which hung at his saddle-bow and cut the snake almost in two with a deft slash ; it sank writhing and helpless. The squatter puffed out a long breath.

‘My word, Dick!’ said he, ‘it’s lucky you saw the beast. I was so busy with the nags that I hadn’t a glance to spare for the track. And if its fangs had got home’—— He stopped, and jerked his shoulders with a wry grimace. Dick nodded gravely, for death would have been a matter of minutes, and not many of them.

‘Well, we’ll collar the horses and resume,’ said Mr Carew. Both animals had been startled by the fierce slash of the

whip. Whitesock had cantered off a score of yards to the left of the track ; the chestnut had galloped off to the right. Dick called to Whitesock, and Mr Carew ran after his horse.

‘Shall I help you to catch him, Mr Carew?’ shouted Dick.

‘Oh no ! I’ll soon round him up,’ replied the squatter. ‘He won’t go far ;’ and he hurried on.

Dick made an end of the wounded snake with a large stone, then walked over and caught Whitesock and led him back to the track. The chestnut had disappeared round a bunch of grass-trees, and Mr Carew had vanished after him. Dick waited a little while, then began to wonder why his companion did not reappear. Still no sign of Mr Carew ; so Dick sprang into the saddle and trotted across to the clump which stood on the crown of a little rise hiding the land beyond.

Dick gained the tiny ridge, then gave a whistle of astonishment and dismay. For in the distance the big chestnut was crossing a wide plain at tremendous speed, heading straight away and going like the wind ; near at hand was Mr Carew, coming back to rejoin his companion. Dick rode at once to meet the squatter.

‘I’ll go after him and catch him,’ cried the boy.

‘Useless, Dick ; perfectly useless,’ replied Mr Carew. ‘He’s bolted for good and all this time. He’s as fast as they make ’em ; he carries no weight ; and if you want my opinion, he’ll never stop till he drops or gets home. It’s a cheerful mess, this is.’ He puffed and mopped his streaming brow, and beat away the flies which sought by myriads to settle round his eyes. Dick was busy with a bunch of grass.

‘What’s to be done?’ said Dick slowly.

‘Hanged if I know,’ said Mr Carew. ‘You see, we’ve got no water now. The chestnut’s bagged our whole stock.’

Yes ; that was the most dreadful feature of the business. The chestnut had carried off his owner’s water-bottle, and

there was not a single drop to moisten their parched and burning throats or revive the lost man, who could not now be far away from them.

'We must go on, Mr Carew,' said the boy. 'Ross couldn't keep on his legs much longer; his tracks show that. And once he's down, you know, the soldier-ants will get him.'

'Come on, Dick,' said Mr Carew shortly. 'I've seen a chap who'd served soldier-ants as tucker; I don't want to see another. Let's get on the tracks.'

'I expect he looked pretty bad,' said the boy.

'They'd skinned him alive,' said Mr Carew. 'He was dead when we found him, but he hadn't been dead long.'

The searchers went back to the trail and pushed on. It soon ceased. Ross was nearer than they thought. They rounded a knot of close-growing gum-trees, and as they did so Dick glanced ahead. There was their man. Fifty yards away a body was stretched at full length in the shadow of a big rock. It was quite motionless. Was he living or dead? Their hearts beat fast as they ran forward.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOTTLE-TREE.

DICK was the first to gain the side of the prostrate figure. Ross lay like a dead man. His face was hidden, for he had covered it with a handkerchief and a layer of leaves. This had, no doubt, been his last movement, to guard his features as long as possible from the mosquitoes and from fierce, flesh-eating ants who would pour out to feast upon his body. And they had already arrived. As Dick ran up he saw the ants marching in steady order upon the helpless man. They were swarming about his feet, and Dick struck at them with a branch of leaves and turned their regular line of march into a disorderly crowd.

The boy dropped on one knee and gently drew the leaves and the handkerchief from Ross's face. Dick shivered. Ross presented a horrible and pitiable sight. His tongue, blue and swollen, protruded from his mouth; his eyes were wide open and fixed in a dreadful and glassy stare. One hand lay across his breast. His nails were torn and broken, and the finger-tips were scarified and dark with dried blood, signs that he had torn up the burning soil in search of water like a wild creature that digs with its paws.

'My word! he looks pretty bad,' said a voice at the boy's shoulder as Mr Carew came up. 'Is he dead, Dick?'

'I don't know,' replied the latter; then he slipped his hand into Ross's shirt. A faint pulsation told Dick that Ross still lived.

'No; his heart's just going, but very feebly,' said the boy. 'But he may be dying now, and what are we to do?'

Ay; what were they to do? It was a tremendous question

to answer. They had found their man ; but they had not a single drop of water to pour into those baked and gaping lips or to moisten that horrible, swollen tongue. They dragged him into a better position in the shade, drove off the ants which had begun to swarm over him, then looked at each other.

‘There’s only one thing to do, Mr Carew,’ said Dick. ‘I must gallop back to the dried-up creek and keep along it till I hit on water somehow or other. Will you stay by him?’

‘There’s nothing else for it, Dick,’ said the squatter. ‘Off with you, and good luck to your search ;’ and he licked his parched lips at the thought of Dick coming back with a full water-bag. The two rescuers were now suffering very severely from thirst themselves, and their plight might soon be almost as bad as that of the unlucky Ross if no water-hole could be discovered.

Dick sprang into the saddle and galloped back at once. Whitesock was suffering too ; but the gallant little beast struck into his speedy stride as if he knew what they were in search of, and soon carried his young master back to the gully where a creek had once run. Here Dick turned his horse and rode along the bank until he gained the point at which he had given up his search the night before. Now he rode down into the creek and trotted along the sandy bed, watching sharply for any sign of water. Twice he sprang down at likely-looking places and dug holes with a pointed stick ; but the sand turned out white and dry as far as he went, nor was there the faintest sign of that pleasant darkening of the soil which tells that water is near. Presently the gully ended. To Dick’s dismay he rode out on to an almost flat stretch of desert sand, where the creek had once formed a tiny lagoon and ended there, as so many creeks do. But the lagoon had disappeared, and its bed was hard and dry, all filled with huge cracks and gaping fissures opened by the terrific heat of the sun.

Dick drew rein and looked round with furrowed, anxious brow. His bushmanship was on its severest trial. Life or death depended on his finding water. How was he to get it? The creek was useless: he knew that now. It was clearly a stream which ran only in winter after the rains. It had been dry this many a day, and a hole twenty feet deep would not reach water, for there was none to reach.

Dick turned Whitesock, and began to work back by a wide sweep towards the spot where he had left his companion. He steered by the sun and by a distant blue hill which he had marked before leaving the spot where Mr Carew guarded the dying man.

‘If I could only hit on another gully, there might be some water in it,’ thought Dick; for he knew that very often water-channels will run parallel with each other, and while one is dry another may have a tiny stream or, at any rate, a water-hole here and there.

But on and on he rode through the burning day, and saw nothing but the dry soil, with dreary gum-trees standing in it, gum-trees long and lanky, with hard leaves which turned their edges to the sun and cast no shade. Again he drew rein and looked about him. He had been moving quite easily; but Whitesock, exhausted by heat and thirst, was panting wearily under him. Five hundred yards away the ground rose to a little hill crowned by a huge gum-tree. Dick came down from the saddle and walked towards it, Whitesock following like a dog. At the foot of the tree Dick sat down and took off his shoes and socks. He was going to the top of the gum-tree, for all that it rose above him like a tall, smooth column with not a branch breaking from the trunk for a good sixty feet. He was going up black-fellow fashion, a trick which had been taught him years ago.

In his swag he carried a tomahawk, and drawing this out, he attacked the big tree in native style. With a swift,

dexterous blow he cut out a notch, another a little above, a third and a fourth. This was as far as he could reach, and now he began to climb with fingers and big toes thrust into the notches. He went up wonderfully fast, and was soon among the branches and swarming to the top of the great tree.

Dick did not cease climbing until he had arrived at the topmost fork; then he scanned with eager gaze the vast stretch of country commanded by the great gum, which rose high above any neighbouring tree. On every hand he looked, and looked in vain. Nowhere could he see a sign of those duskie leaves which show that water is near or has been near the roots of the trees on which they grow.

At last he glanced into a patch of scrub growing almost at the foot of the gum, but on the side opposite from that in which he had advanced, and saw there a large bottle-tree with its quaint white trunk, swelling out widely below and closing in above till it looks precisely like a huge bottle. Dick looked at it carelessly at first, while he wondered what to do and which way to strike; then his glance sharpened and his eyes became fixed on some marks plainly to be seen on the upper part of the bottle-tree.

‘My Colonial!’ breathed Dick. ‘Perhaps blacks have been cutting it and it isn’t tapped yet.’ He had been quick going up the tree; he went down a lot quicker, and ran, tomahawk in hand, to the bottle-tree.

Yes; there were the holes which some wandering black-fellows had cut in the trunk. The marks were old, and Dick leapt round the tree, fearing to see new marks; but there were none, and the boy cried joyously, ‘Water, water!’ and selected a spot about eighteen inches below the old cuts, and began to hew with all his might at the smooth white trunk.

It was some black-fellows’ water-store upon which the young bushman had hit. In the rainy season the wild blacks will

cut holes in the trunk of a bottle-tree, and in these holes the water collects and in time rots the heart of the tree, where the water gathers and is stored. When the store is needed it is easily obtained by tapping the tree below the holes, and from a large tree a good supply may be obtained.

CHAPTER VI.

WATER.

HALF-A-DOZEN swift cuts, and a cry of joy burst from Dick's baked lips; water was beginning to ooze.

He turned round, for Whitesock had followed him, and grabbed at the water-bag swinging at his saddle-D's and opened its mouth widely and held it in place. Another cut just in the right place and of the right depth and the water spurted out. He filled the water-bag, he filled the billy, and the precious stream ceased to flow. He held the billy to Whitesock's velvet muzzle, and the little horse drank greedily and licked out the last drops from the bottom of the tin. Then Dick fastened the water-bag with its priceless load very carefully into place, and swung up into the saddle and was off at full speed for the spot where he had left his friend. Straight as a bee to its hive the bushboy took his line to the place, and raised a joyous 'Coo-ee!' as he came in sight of Mr Carew watching beside the dying man.

'Is it water, Dick?' cried the squatter.

'Water it is,' replied the boy. 'I've got a bagful from a bottle-tree, and jolly lucky to get it. There isn't a water-hole with a drop in it in the country.'

He sprang down and unstrapped the water-bag, and the two rescuers now strove to bring back to life the stricken man. Very, very carefully they poured a little water into his mouth, pushing aside the swollen and discoloured tongue to make way for the life-giving fluid.

'Now the thing is, which way is it going?' said Mr Carew. 'If it starts down his windpipe we shall choke him, and all our trouble will have been for nothing.'

'No, no, Mr Carew!' cried Dick earnestly; 'it's all right. It's going down his throat. Look! he can swallow.'

'So he can,' chuckled the squatter. 'Dead as he looks, there's a bit of life in him. A drop more water, Dick.'

For an hour they poured water into the cracked lips by very little drops at a time, and wiped Ross's face with a wet handkerchief; and then animation began slowly to return to the stricken man. His eyes moved in their sockets, and he seemed to know Dick. He tried to speak, but he could only produce the most ghastly noises from his throat, and Dick begged him to lie still and keep quiet, telling him that he was in the hands of friends and would soon be pulled round.

Ross seemed to understand, and after drinking a little more water appeared to fall into a swooning doze, his body twitching and trembling at times, then writhing as one might writhe in the horrors of a dreadful nightmare.

'That's the life working back into him,' said Mr Carew. 'I knew a chap who was once rescued when just on the point of death, and he told me that his worst sufferings were just after he was found. He said the blood seemed to work back through his veins in a series of frightful jerks, and each jerk sent pain through him as if he was being stabbed with red-hot knives.'

There was silence for a few moments as they watched the unconscious man; then Mr Carew smacked his dry and burning lips and glanced at the water-bag; it was still half-full.

'Have a drink, Mr Carew,' said Dick. 'I only tapped one side of the tree. I'll ride back and have a go at the other side; there ought to be a lot more in it.'

'Well,' said Mr Carew, 'my throat does feel like a dry bone that's been in the sun for a twelvemonth, and I'll just take a drop to damp it. I suppose you had a good drink there, Dick?'

'No,' said the boy quietly; 'I haven't tasted it yet.'

'Then, by all the dry gullies in the "Never-Never," you shall have a turn before me!' cried the squatter. 'Here have I been sitting in the shade while you galloped through the sun, and yet you never tasted a drop!'

'I didn't know whether there'd be enough or not,' said Dick. 'I gave Whitesock a billyful, though, for I couldn't carry that very well.'

'Drink, my lad; drink,' said Mr Carew, and filled a tin cup which had been in Dick's swag, and Dick drank as a bushman drinks when water is scarce, taking it drop by drop, washing it round and round his mouth, then swallowing it very slowly. Next Mr Carew drank in similar fashion, and the remainder was emptied into the tin cup for the next dose for Ross.

Then Dick took the water-bag and returned to the bottle-tree, where he managed to fill it again and get nearly a billyful once more for Whitesock.

On Dick's return with the bulging water-bag he found that Ross was rapidly improving. He had got down the contents of the tin cup, and was now looking round him with comprehension in his gaze. He could not speak yet; but steady drops of water eased his tongue, and gradually it withdrew into his mouth. Next he became able to swallow a little soaked damper; and now Dick and Mr Carew took a little food themselves, and began to discuss the next move.

'We'll pack him on Whitesock and start home as soon as evening draws on,' said the boy. 'Better travel by night; it'll be a bit cooler, and the sun might do for him, so weak as he is, if we march by day.'

'Right you are, my young wonder,' said the squatter. 'You're not very big, Dick, and you're not very old, but, by George! I'll follow you as if you were old King Combo himself, and he's the best tracker I've got, and the best I've ever known till I dropped across you, Dick, my son.'

That's our way, isn't it?' and the squatter pointed to a dim blue hill in the distance.

Dick grinned and shook his head. 'No, Mr Carew,' he chuckled; 'that's our way;' and he pointed almost in the opposite direction. 'We've got to keep that hill almost behind us as long as we can see it, and when night comes we've got to keep the Cross over the right shoulder.'

Mr Carew whistled. 'I give it up, Dick,' he laughed. 'I told you I was no great shakes as a bushman, and I'm proving it all the time.'

Dick smiled and turned to Ross, who was eagerly motioning with his eyes towards the water-bag. But the life-giving fluid was only given him by drops at a time, for a great quantity would have been dangerous to him in his present state.

So the day wore away, and when the huge fiery ball sloped towards the western horizon Ross was a great deal better, and, with the aid of Mr Carew, was able to stick to the saddle of the gentle, easy-stepping Whitesock, and away they went, marching through the dry gums as steadily as if they were following a beaten track, Dick setting the line for them.

Night fell and the great stars blazed out, brightest of them all the huge constellation of the Southern Cross, at which Dick glanced from time to time to get his bearings.

On and on they moved, hour after hour, with only two spells of resting, until a faint gray came into the east and they knew that the day was near at hand. By this time Dick and Mr Carew were very stiff and tired, and Ross had collapsed utterly in the saddle and had been lashed into place with a spare girth.

Suddenly Dick stopped and lifted his hand. 'Listen,' he said. 'What's that? What's that?'

All stood still, and faint and far off a distant chattering came to their ears.

'White cockatoos!' said Dick.

'White cockatoos, by gum! So they are!' said the squatter, and heaved a huge sigh of relief. 'Which way, Dick, my boy?'

'This,' said Dick, and swung away at a tangent towards the sound, for the presence of white cockatoos means water in the neighbourhood, and their need for the life-giving fluid was again great and urgent; the water-bag was quite empty and a baking day was once more at hand.

Half-an-hour's march brought them to a patch of shea-oaks, through whose branches white cockatoos were flitting and calling, for the sun was now up.

'Good,' grunted Dick; 'we're right now, Mr Carew. I know where I am. This is Big Gum Water-hole. Come on. We can get all the water we want here.'

They hurried forward, and soon the most delightful sight in the world opened out before them. They gazed on a small lagoon of clear water, with a huge gum springing up at one end, a lagoon with grassy shores and water, water, water to drink, and drink to satisfying. They gained the bank and lifted Ross down, and Whitesock, furious at the smell of the water, rushed in knee-deep and drank greedily.

Ross would have struggled into the pool as well if his companions had not restrained him. Mr Carew held him, while Dick ran and dipped the billy in and brought it back dripping. Then all three drank, and nothing in their lives had ever tasted so sweet as that water. It seemed to flow through their bodies like new life, and they drank and swiftly became themselves again.

Then they made a fire, and Dick turned out his tucker-bag and set to work to mix flour and water for Johnny-cakes, for the damper was finished. The cakes were baked, and they ate and drank again, while Whitesock cropped madly at the tender grass round the edges of the water-hole.

'Well, we're all right now,' said Dick. 'We're less than twelve miles from Homewood.'

'Good,' said Mr Carew, waving a leafy branch to keep the flies off Ross, who had dropped into a heavy slumber. 'Now, Dick, stretch yourself out and get two or three hours' sleep while Whitesock crops his fill. Then you can ride across and bring horses for us.'

The plan was good, and it was followed at once. A three-hours' nap brought Dick to his feet, fresh and lively. He mounted Whitesock and cantered away, leaving Mr Carew on guard over Ross, who still slept soundly.

Every mile Dick rode brought him into country which he knew better and better, and soon he saw the ridge which looked down upon Ross's selection. He crossed it and rode down to the house. On the veranda stood his mother.

'It's all right, mother. We've got him,' said the boy.

'Thank God!' said Mrs Barry. 'I'll go and tell the poor soul. She's beside herself. You've been away so long that she fears the worst.'

'He did lead us a bit of a dance,' said Dick. 'I've left him along with Mr Carew by Big Gum Water-hole. Now I want a couple of horses to fetch 'em in. Hallo! there's Bungo Sam. I'll get what I want from him.'

Dick rode towards the black-fellow, and was soon rounding-up a couple of horses in the yard, while his mother turned into the house to carry the glad tidings. Dick cut with the horses as quickly as he could. He feared terribly that he might be the object of thanks, tears, and embraces, for he knew that Mrs Ross was emotional, and Dick hated fuss of any kind.

When he got back to the water-hole, Ross was sitting up and pretty well himself again.

'Well, that looks a bit better,' said Dick as he dismounted.

'My word, Dick!' said the selector, 'this has been a mighty narrow thing for yours truly. I've been doing my

best to thank this gentleman, and he says you're the one that really saved me.'

'That's a fact,' said the squatter. 'Without Dick, my friend, you'd have been a goner by now. I could never have found you.'

'That's all right,' laughed Dick. 'We're bound to turn out and have a look round when a man's bushed. Now up with you, Ross; your wife wants to see you again.'

They got to horse and went to Homewood, and when Mr Carew and Dick had seen Ross safely inside the house they slipped off. Mr Carew continued his journey on Ross's horse, telling Bungo Sam that he would send it back soon; and Dick went home, turned in, and slept till the next morning, when his mother woke him up and wanted to know all particulars.

CHAPTER VII.

DICK MEETS SOME BOY SCOUTS.

THREE days after the rescue of Ross two boys were standing on the wide veranda of Narana head-station talking together. One of them was looking eastwards across a wide stretch of plain, as he had been looking at intervals all the day before. This was Arthur Carew, and his companion was Ned Champion, a school friend who had come up to Narana with him on a visit.

‘I wonder what under the sun’s come to father,’ said Arthur uneasily. ‘He ought to have been back long ago. He was only going straight to Wilmoora and back. The round-up begins to-morrow.’ He glanced again across the plains, where a rough track ran east to Wilmoora and the distant bush township; but there was no sign on it of a horseman cantering homewards.

A man passed at a short distance, and Arthur hailed him.

‘Are you going down to the yard, Dick?’ he cried.

‘Goin’ now,’ replied Dick, who was one of the stockmen.

‘Please tell Waddy Joe to saddle a couple of horses and bring them up.’

‘All right,’ said Dick, and went on.

‘Suppose we go for a gallop along the track and see if we can make out any sign of him coming back?’ said Arthur.

‘Right you are,’ said Ned; ‘but you don’t think there’s anything wrong, do you? Are there any myalls [wild blacks] about here?’

‘Not just here,’ returned Arthur; ‘there are plenty farther north; but they haven’t shown up about Narana for a year or two now.’

‘Well, suppose we put on our rig and go on scout for your pater?’ suggested Ned.

‘We will,’ said Arthur; ‘we’ll ride as far as Ballamoola and see if the Barrys have seen something of him, anyway.’

‘Ballamoola?’ said Ned. ‘Is that where your wonderful Dick Barry lives?’

‘That’s the spot, my son,’ replied Arthur, smiling; ‘and you may poke fun as much as you like at my tales of him. But wait till you know Dick a bit; he’ll show you what being a bushman means.’

Both Arthur and Ned were members of the same patrol of Boy Scouts. A corps had been formed at their school, and they belonged to the Emu Patrol, and were wrapped up heart and soul in the great movement. They now quickly slipped into their scout-dress, mounted the horses which had been brought to the veranda by Waddy Joe, an old black-fellow, and rode along the hot, dusky track at a smart trot.

They had gone a good seven miles, when they rode through a scrub-path over a little bluff where the timber fell away and gave them a wide view over a stretch of flat, sun-burnt country. Arthur was ahead, and let out a tremendous yell as he cantered over the bluff. There were two figures crossing the plain and coming towards him, and he knew them both.

‘Come on, Ned,’ he cried. ‘It’s all right. Here’s dad, and Dick Barry with him.’

Ned galloped up, and the two boys rode swiftly towards the new-comers. In a few moments the two parties had met, and Arthur and Dick were shaking hands and Ned was being introduced. Then as they rode towards Narana, while Mr Carew, in reply to Arthur’s eager questions as to his delay, was telling the story of the lost man, Ned was quietly taking stock of this Dick Barry of whom he had heard so much. He saw a boy of his own age, rather tall and rather thin, but very wiry and muscular, with a face burnt a rich bronze by the fierce tropical sun, and quiet, gray eyes with a

friendly and honest look in them. Dick was clad in a clean print-shirt, pink springs on a white ground, well-washed moleskin trousers kept in place by a green-hide belt, an ancient cabbage-tree hat on his head, and his coat rolled up and bundled with his swag, the latter done up in a blue blanket, for he had come out prepared for camping.

‘Where are your hands for the round-up, father?’ asked Arthur.

‘I’ve got a good one, and that’s all,’ said Mr Carew, nodding his head towards Dick. ‘Couldn’t get a soul at Wilmoora; they’re short-handed as it is, so I called at Ballamoola on the way back and enlisted Dick for a few days.’

‘Good business,’ said Arthur. ‘There’ll be a chance, too, for Dick to get some tips about riding. Jerry Britton turned up this morning.’

They all laughed but Ned, who did not catch Arthur’s drift. The latter explained.

‘It’s like this, Ned,’ said Arthur. ‘Jerry reckons himself the coming man in these parts as a rider, and other folks have a fancy for Dick. So Jerry always tries to make a match with Dick to ride the worst buck-jumpers about the place when they happen to meet, and Dick’s always ready to take him on, and that’s what I meant.’

‘I twig,’ laughed Ned. ‘Have you got anything pretty stiff about Narana to try them with?’

‘There’s old Scrubby, a pretty bad handful,’ remarked Mr Carew. ‘I got on him once, but he pitched me over a five-rail fence, and I wasn’t taking any more that time.’

‘Oh father, Dick rode him all over the place last time he was up at Narana!’ cried Arthur.

‘And Jerry,’ said Dick quietly.

‘Oh, you parted square that time?’ said Mr Carew, and Dick nodded.

‘But Jerry’s got one up for you this time, Dick,’ cried Arthur. ‘Only this morning he was asking if you’d be

about at this round-up. "I've got a challenge ready for that there Ballamoola Dick," he said. "I'm going to put him through this time, and no mistake." So I tried to get him to tell what it was, but he only grinned and wouldn't say any more.'

'Looks as if there was trouble in front of me,' murmured Dick; and they all laughed.

Chatting thus, they had jogged through the scrub and had come to the open track. Now they put their horses to a hand-gallop and went swiftly towards Narana.

As they rode Dick eyed again and again the rig-out of Arthur and Ned. Yes; they were got up just like the boys in the picture in the paper which Boona Bill had given him. Now he was going to find out all about this Scout business, and he wished very much he could get a dress like that. But things were not very flush at Ballamoola just at present, for their losses in the drought had made money a rather scarce thing. Still, perhaps you could be a Boy Scout without the rig—at any rate, for a start. Dick hoped so.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHALLENGE.

THE challenge of which Arthur had spoken came that afternoon when Dick, Arthur, and Ned went down to the huts to see how things were going on there. The Narana stockmen had made a beginning at the round-up already, and had driven a mob of bullocks, heifers, cows, and calves, all mixed up, from a patch of scrubby country quite close to the head-station. The yard was filled with a crowd of shaggy, horned beasts of all colours, from black through roans and browns and reds to white and their mixtures of every shade ; and the mob was making a tremendous uproar, as if growling at the exchange of their wild, free scrub with its pickings of grass round the water-holes for this enclosure of logs, against which some of the wildest charged in vain. The boys swung themselves up on the fence to look at the cattle, and here Jerry Britton found them.

He was a lanky, rather weedy-looking youth of sixteen, dressed much the same as Dick, though his clothes were not quite so clean ; and he hailed them with a cheerful ‘Hello, mates, how are ye poppin’ up?’

‘Hello, Jerry!’ they replied ; ‘that you?’ and made room for him on the fence.

‘Well, Dick,’ said Jerry, coming to business at once, ‘I’m a-lookin’ for ye.’

‘All right, Jerry,’ said Dick. ‘You’ve got me. What’s up now?’

‘Why, it’s like this, see,’ drawled Jerry. ‘Dingo Sam, the rail-splitter, he says to me, he says, as you’re braggin’ as you kin ride a hoss as ’ud kick me off fust time I put my leg over him.’

Dick laughed. 'He's pulling your leg, Jerry. I never said anything of the kind. You know what Sam is. He's always trying to take a rise out of somebody.'

'Um!' grunted Jerry in a dissatisfied tone. He had expected Dick to take fire, and answer sharply and say that's just what he could do, and then Jerry could have brought out his challenge before the two strange boys with great effect. Jerry looked with considerable awe on the big squatter's son and his friend, fellows who knew all about great cities and were very different from the boys of 'Out Back' in their dress and ways, and he wished to impress them. He showed his awe by being very off-hand with them, and contradicting them flat on every possible occasion, and generally showing them that they were not going to 'boss' Jerry Britton about; and this is the Australian way.

Jerry sniffed and shut one eye and squinted at the cattle. He had very bright eyes of a clear china-blue, which shone in a face 'burnt to a brick,' as they say.

'We all know you're a flash-hand with a horse, Jerry,' said Arthur gravely.

'I should think so,' drawled Jerry, who was as simple as he was conceited about his horsemanship. 'Show me the wust "outlaw" in this districk, an' I'll get on him an' I'll take it out of him fust try.'

An 'outlaw' is a bad, wild horse who has been driven in from the scrubs and plains, and is about as amiable as a wounded tiger or rogue elephant.

'I've seen you ride some tough horses, Jerry,' said Dick in a friendly tone.

'So you hev', Dick; so you hev'. An' I've seen ye handle 'em a bit as well,' said the long-legged youth; 'but I've got a challenge for ye as I've had my mind set on for a bit, an' I give it out here an' now wi' these to listen;' and Jerry sat up stiffly and proudly.

'Speak up, Jerry,' said Dick.

'It's this, Dick Barry,' said his rival. 'I don't challenge yer to ride any hoss this time, but to match me at ridin' a bareback bullock fresh out o' the mob. I pick your bullock an' you pick mine. How's that for a challenge?'

'You want to break my neck this time, Jerry,' said Dick.

'Just same chance to break me own,' replied Jerry, and Dick nodded.

'Is that there challenge took, or ain't it, Dick Barry?' demanded Jerry.

Dick chuckled. 'Well,' he drawled gently, 'I've rid a quiet bullock many a time and oft, as father says, just for the fun of it; but then, Jerry, I ain't dead certain as ye'll pick me a quiet one.'

Jerry Britton got off the fence and faced his companions. He smacked one hand into the other with a solemn gesture, for he was in deadly earnest over this matter.

'Look here now, Ballamoola Dick; if ye don't want to take that there challenge, you jest say so. I'll give ye best in trackin' an' I'll give ye best in bein' a bushman, an' if ye'll give me best in ridin' we'll let it go at that.'

The two city boys had hard work not to laugh at Jerry's grim and resolute face; but they looked as grave as any one else, and well for them that they did, for Jerry would have promptly knocked them off the fence if he had dreamed for an instant that they were laughing at him.

'Seems you're pushing me into a corner, Jerry,' said Dick, rubbing his jaw. 'I suppose I'll have to take you on. When is it to be?'

'Five o'clock, at the bottom yard,' said Jerry promptly.

'All right,' said Dick; 'I'll be there.'

Five o'clock came, and with it a very lively scene at the bottom yard. All the stockmen had come up from the men's huts, and sat on the fence, smoking and laughing and giving hints to the rival bullock-riders. Dick wore his usual quiet grin; but Jerry had a face of funereal solemnity

which sent the stockmen into fits of laughter. But he did not mind them laughing; they were all old friends, and besides, he was shortly going to turn those laughs into glances of respectful wonder.

By this time the newly driven in mob had been turned into the bottom yard, and there was an abundance of awkward beasts from which to make a choice.

'We'll draw for fust pick,' cried Jerry, and Dick nodded.

Arthur Carew took two splinters of wood and held them in his hand. 'First pick to him who draws the long one,' said Arthur, and Dick drew it.

He glanced across to the mob. 'There's your bullock, Jerry,' he said, and pointed to the first one he saw, a big, bony specimen which was standing close to the rails and bellowing mournfully.

'Right,' said Jerry, and without a moment's delay he swung himself over the fence; he made a swift run up behind the lowing beast and vaulted cleverly on to his back, a feat which was greeted with a loud shout of applause. Then he dug in his heels and gripped the beast's ribs with his long, lank thighs, and unrolled the stock-whip, which had been fastened round his body till he was mounted.

It was most comical to watch the bullock. For a moment he stood still. His bellowing stopped short; his mouth gaped widely; but he could not make a sound, so great was his surprise at finding this strange burden on his back. Then he dashed into a herd of his friends and wedged himself among them. Jerry drew up his long legs and sat like a tailor on the bullock's back, at the same time plying his long whip on the beasts around him in order to get the mob on the move. Roaring like mad creatures, the startled mob darted off and swept at full speed across the yard for the open gate which led into the paddock; then they burst into the open and scattered, each rushing madly from the big bullock which bore so strange a load.

‘Now, Jerry, stick tight,’ yelled the onlookers; ‘now you’re going to see trouble. The bullock’s got room to handle ye now.’

Jerry himself knew very well that the moment of trial had come. He lapped his long legs round the ribs of the infuriated brute and held on with all his strength. All eyes were eagerly fixed on him.

CHAPTER IX.

JERRY'S BATTLE.

FOR the first few minutes Jerry held his own in capital style. The bullock went in for a terrific burst across and then around the wide paddock, hoping to run away from the strange burden which he bore. But he could have galloped all day and Jerry would not have troubled about that, and the bullock seemed to divine it. For suddenly he stopped dead and tucked his head between his fore-legs. It was a movement well calculated to send any ordinary rider flying far over the beast's head; but bush boys and men are not ordinary riders, and Jerry only gripped a little tighter with his knees and sat there smiling. Then the bullock indulged in all sorts of furious antics, such as leaping violently to one side and then the other, rearing, prancing, and then screwed up his tail and began kicking up his hind-legs in so comical a fashion that the spectators on the paddock-fence were convulsed with laughter. But through it all Jerry stuck as tight as ever and gaily cracked the long thong of his stock-whip in the bullock's ear.

'By gum!' shouted Billy Weir, the head-stockman, 'Jerry's going beyond himself a bit to-day. How he sticks on the hard, slippery, shiny coat o' that bullock I can't make out. That's what gits me, how he keeps on when the beggar rears. I've tried to ride a bullock many a time, and slid off again pretty quick. There ain't no grip to be had of 'em.'

Sitting beside Billy was a little old fellow with a very dry twinkle in his eye. He was a boundary-rider named Peter Barnes, but was always spoken of as Old Pete.

Old Pete chuckled. 'Did ye iver soak yer breeches before gittin' on, Billy?' he asked.

Billy began to laugh. 'So that's the dodge, is it?' said Billy. 'Did you put Jerry up to it, Pete?'

Old Pete nodded and chuckled again. He was an old crony of Jerry's uncle, and had given the fortunate youth a hint, on which Jerry had acted. His trousers were of a dark material, and he had taken them off and wrung them out in a bucket of water just before the trial.

But alas for poor Jerry! All of a sudden disaster befell him, and even his wetted trousers did not save him, for the bullock proved his match and a little more. This is what happened. The bullock went off again at full gallop, and Jerry sat his mount with great comfort and with no little delight, for he could feel that the big, ungainly beast was becoming pumped and would be soon done up from sheer exhaustion, and then victory, glorious victory, would be his; and again and again he cracked his stock-whip joyously as the panting, wild-eyed beast urged his mad career round the paddock. But the bullock played Jerry one swift, vicious trick which upset all his rider's fond ideas. For while dashing along close to the boundary, the beast made a sudden leap sideways and drove his body hard against the great rails of the fence. Jerry was taken a little unawares, and was slightly, only slightly, shaken in his seat. Instantly he clutched the heavy ribs tighter with his legs, and this gave the bullock the opportunity of grinding Jerry's right leg against the rails in a most savage fashion. Next he turned at a tangent and darted on one last furious burst across the open, bearing now a disabled rider, for all the use had for the moment been knocked out of Jerry's leg.

Sixty yards from the fence the bullock stopped dead and shot up his hind-legs. With one leg quite numbed, poor Jerry no longer had any grip of the living volcano beneath him, and he was whirled high from the bullock's back, and,



Jerry was whirled high from the bullock's back

turning a complete summersault in the air, fell flat on his own back with a tremendous bump.

The bullock wheeled round and would have charged his prostrate foe had not a dozen helping hands intervened. There was a rush of stockmen from the rails, Dick Barry at their head, and the bullock was at once driven off, and Jerry was picked up.

'Oh!' groaned Jerry, 'I'm all bust; I'm in sixteen separate bits. Pick me up gently, mates;' and they took him up carefully and assisted him to the rails, and gave him a long, comforting drink from a jug of lemonade which Arthur had brought down, and then he felt better.

'Bear up, Jerry, my son,' said Billy the stockman; 'you did uncommon well to stick to the beast as long as you did. My Colonial! he'd have had any man, as you may say, with that there vicious jump o' his'n sideways at the rails.'

Jerry groaned. He had been chucked off, and his only consolation now was the hope that Ballamoola Dick would be pitched off as well. He rather fancied Dick would be. Jerry had been 'looking over his fences,' as he would have put it, and had got his eye on a very bad hat in the mob. He meant to give Dick a mount on that particular brute, and hoped that, after all, they would part square as being companions in defeat.

'Hard luck, Jerry,' said Dick. 'I thought you'd pretty near done him up by the way he was blowing. How does your leg feel now?'

'Uh!' grunted Jerry; 'you ain't won yet, Dick Barry. Wait till I get my wind a bit, and I'm a-goin' to pick out a sneezer for ye.'

'All right, Jerry,' said Dick gently; 'and while you're getting your wind, can I run down to the creek and soak my moleskins to get a bit of a hold on him?'

There was a great roar of laughter from the crowd of

stockmen and station-hands, for Old Pete's tip had leaked out and been whispered round.

'Whose pants are wet?' bellowed Jerry.

'Yours,' replied Dick. 'I helped to carry you up to the rails, and they're a long way off dry now.'

'I wanted to be cool,' howled Jerry; and his delighted audience squealed again.

'All right; keep cool,' said Dick. 'And when you're ready to pick out my mount, I'm ready for him.'

'Ain't yer goin' to have a soak, Dick?' cried Billy.

Dick shook his head.

'It's no end of a good trick,' urged the stockman. 'Anybody who's slid an' slithered about a bullock's back can see that. Besides, 'tain't fair fer you to ride dry an' him wet.'

'Never mind, Billy,' said Dick. 'I'll take my chances.'

While this conversation had been going on, a couple of blacks, hands employed on the station, had driven the mob of cattle up into the yard again; and when Jerry had got his wind and assured himself that, after all, no bones were broken by his fall, the whole party moved that way.

'Better mind yer eye, Dick,' murmured the friendly Billy. 'Jerry ain't goin' to pick out no poddy for ye this time.'

'I'll do what I can, Billy,' said Dick. 'I don't fancy that was a poddy I dropped on for him.'

A 'poddy' is a calf which has been hand-reared about the station, and is accustomed to men and horses, and so shows no fear of them. He has no trace of the fierce wildness of the calves born and reared in the bush.

'No; but it was middlin' quiet compared to some,' said the stockman, 'an' there's a big yellow brute in yon mob as I rather fancy Jerry seen when it was druv' in this mornin'. It was just about all I could do to turn him, an' I was on the best camp-horse we've got, old Pimpernel.'

Billy the stockman proved to be right. Jerry had seen the furious play which the yellow bullock had made to

escape in the morning, and now his finger shot out as the great bony beast charged through the mob, scattering the other animals right and left.

'There's your mount, Dick,' he cried.

Dick nodded, and climbing the fence, sat on the top rail and looked over the ground. Behind him there was no little protest.

'Easy, Jerry; easy, lad,' said a long stockman named Dave Baker. 'It ain't much short o' murder to ask a kid to tackle that 'ere bullock. He's a pretty bad un—I know him. He'll charge a man at sight. Gi' Dick a fair show.'

'What are yer jawin' about?' growled Jerry, whose fall had put him in a bad temper. 'He ain't obliged to ride him at all. If Dick don't like the look o' him, Dick can leave the job alone.'

Arthur Carew was very uneasy too, and he climbed the fence and perched himself beside his friend.

'I say, Dick, old chap,' said Arthur, 'I know you can ride pretty well anything; but, really, I wouldn't tackle that big yellow beast if I were you. I saw them bring him in this morning, and he gave them a frightful lot of trouble. They said he was the worst beast on the run. He very nearly had his horns into one or two of the horses.'

For a moment Dick did not reply. He was looking intently at the big bullock, which was ranging to and fro, his huge snout now and again wrinkling back and baring the upper jaw in that ugly and forbidding grin which shows bovine rage or disgust. Then Dick turned his head.

'It's all right, Arthur,' he said. 'I can't back out, you know. I picked Jerry's bullock and he did his bit. I should be a bit of a crawler if I backed out now. What bothers me is how I'm to get on him. He's a trifle flash with his horns, I reckon.'

For two minutes Dick again sat motionless, and Jerry began to hope that his rival did not mean to tackle the very

awkward job; then down sprang Dick from the fence and made for the gate between the yard and the paddock. In a trice he had swarmed up to the broad top bar which crossed the gateway, and now he shouted to the two blackboys, who were known as Bismarck and Mr Gladstone, to drive the mob of cattle out to the paddock again.

CHAPTER X.

DICK AND THE YELLOW BULLOCK.

WHEN the stockmen saw that the boy was resolved to try the yellow bullock they said no more, but mounted the rails and kept their whips handy, ready to run in and prevent the savage brute from goring Dick if the rider should be flung. All eyes were now fixed on the galloping mob as it headed for the gate, and there was not a sound to be heard save the dull thunder of the trampling hoofs.

Then a shout of applause rose as Dick was seen to swing himself from the bar and drop—to drop straight on the back of the yellow bullock as he rushed beneath him. Down shot his feet, and from seat to heels his legs were locked about the gaunt ribs in a vice-like grip.

For such time as he ran some thirty yards, the bullock did not seem to be aware of what had befallen him. Then he half-stopped and glanced in mingled anger and affright at the strange load which he bore. He threw up his head and sniffed wildly. It was the hated scent of man, and he gave a frightful snorting bellow and was off across the paddock in a series of wild plunging leaps, as if in hopes that he could run away from this very unpleasing load. But Dick sat him like wax, and the big bullock soon found that mere plunging about was of no use at all. Then he dashed away at his wildest gallop and at full speed, pulled up dead, and planted his two fore-legs, as stiff as iron bars, in the brown dust of the paddock. Dick's body swung to meet the horrible jarring shock of that dead pull up; but his grip on the hard, shiny coat was not moved by the fraction of an inch. Now the bullock reared madly, so that his horns flashed high above

the boy's head as Dick leaned forward and took a handful of the shaggy hair on the neck to meet the move; then down came the beast on all fours again, and away he went for another tremendous scour round the great paddock at a speed wonderful for so big and clumsy a creature, and the mob fled before him, lowing and yelling till the air was filled with the thunder of its uproar.

Suddenly the yellow bullock, now beside himself with rage and fury that he had hitherto failed to dislodge this terrible creature that clung to him as a limpet clings to a rock, tried the dodge which had brought about the downfall of Jerry. He aimed to crush his rider; but instead of choosing the paddock-rails he rushed madly against a big iron-bark which stood in the midst of the paddock.

His eye crimson with rage, his nostrils blowing foam, his yellow hide splotted with dull patches of sweat, the big bullock made a tremendous charge and hurled himself with terrific force against the great trunk, aiming to crush the leg which gripped his panting side. But at the very instant of contact that leg was tossed lightly up and laid along his shoulder, and the bullock only landed his own ribs against the tree with such crashing force that the wind was driven out of him with a mighty 'whoof!' which could be heard all over the place, and the stockmen shouted applause and cracked their whips, so that it sounded as if a fusillade was being fired in honour of the intrepid and dexterous rider.

Staggering a dozen yards from the iron-bark, the bullock came to a standstill, his head held down ruefully, his breath whistling through his distended nostrils.

'Jump down, Dick,' roared one or two of the onlookers. 'You've got him to a dead-finish. He can't lift a hoof.'

But Dick shook his head and sat quite still. The boy knew that the bullock was far from spent. The tremendous charge into the tree had knocked the wind out of him for the time, and that was all; and as the boy was out to

ride his mount to a finish, he too took a rest and eased the numbing clutch he had maintained on the barrel of the bony bullock.

Suddenly Dick closed his grip once more. The instinct of the born horseman told him that the beast was about to move. He was only just in time. At the next instant the dust was flying in clouds as the yellow, shaggy beast tore down the paddock at a pace as good as the best he had done yet. He was heading for a clump of trees whose branches spread out low and wide, and a warning cry went up from the onlookers as they realised the cunning trick the bullock meant to play. His idea was to dash under the low boughs and sweep off this creature which clung so tightly and surely on his back. Dick saw the danger, and eyed it coolly as he was borne down to the clump as on the wings of a whirlwind.

'My Colonial!' said the boy to himself, and whistled in vexation. 'I've got to chuck myself off after all, I believe. Seems as if he can just scratch his back all along that lowest branch, and if he can it won't be healthy to be on his back at that minute.'

Then Dick threw himself flat along the great steer's back and raised his head and watched the lowest limb with keen, bright eyes. He would fling himself off, of course, sooner than be dashed against that iron branch, but he would wait till the last moment; there might be a few more inches of clearance than there seemed.

Ten strides from the low, straight branch Dick decided he could just do it. Down he went flat as a pancake, his head tucked behind the heaving withers, his hands clutching the shaggy hide, his heel getting a purchase against the bony hip, and so he lay tight and waited. He just did it; the bough rasped his very shirt as he passed under it; but under he did pass, and then with a quick turn he was in his seat once more and driving in his heels and pounding

on the bullock's back to urge him to greater speed. Again the great beast wheeled and went the length of the paddock ; but his pace was not what it was. He had shot his bolt ; his flanks were heaving with exhaustion, and near the gate into the yard he came to a standstill ; blew for a time, went off again, but with no great heart in his work ; stopped again, and this time for good.

'He's done, Dick,' roared Billy ; 'he'll never lift hoof or horn against ye this day. There isn't a puff o' wind left in his hide.'

Yes ; the savage yellow bullock was beaten. Dick sprang down and went to his head and stroked his nose, and the bullock only panted and stared at the ground. Then he lay down, utterly done up, and stretched himself along in the dust, quite heedless of the spectators who swarmed across to look at him and congratulate his conqueror.

'Done with neither whip nor stick in your hand, Dick, old chap !' cried Arthur Carew. 'It was wonderful.'

'Wasn't it?' cried Ned Campion. 'I've seen a lot of these flash-riders taking it out of buck-jumpers, but nothing like this.'

And then up came Jerry, rather disappointed and disgruntled, but willing to own up and take his beating.

'Well, you've put me through this time, Ballamoola Dick,' said he with a wry twist of the mouth ; 'but you're the dead-finish on a bullock's back, I'll say that.'

But all Dick had to say was, 'Where's that lemonade-jug?' And every one allowed that he had earned a drink this time, anyway.

After supper Dick, Arthur, and Ned sat on the veranda, swinging their legs and talking. That is to say, Arthur and Ned were doing the talking, and Dick was the listener. And a capital listener he made. His friends were holding forth on the delights of being Boy Scouts, and Dick just wanted to know all about it. At last he spoke.

'Seems to me the Boy-Scout business is just smelling out tracks and camping and making yourself generally useful,' he remarked at last.

'That's a bull's-eye to you, Dick,' said Arthur. 'You've reckoned it up pretty close there. And you're a rippin' good Boy Scout yourself without knowing it.'

'Oh, I dunno,' said Dick.

'But you are,' cried Arthur. 'You can follow tracks like a first-rate black-tracker; you can ride like one of those old chaps who were horse and man at once. What did they call them?'

'Centaurs,' said Ned.

'That's it,' cried Arthur—'ride like a centaur; and as for camping and that sort of thing, why, you're up to every trick in that.'

Dick nodded. He certainly was. He could pitch camp with any one, boil his billy, make a Johnny-cake or damper, cook his meat, and live out-of-doors a month on end with great comfort. It was second nature to him; and the sky with its hosts of shining stars was as familiar to him as the roof of the skillion, the little lean-to room in which he slept at home at Ballamoola.

'You ought to get a patrol up here, Dick,' said Ned Campion.

'Wish I could,' said Dick, and Arthur laughed. Ned looked round at Arthur to see why he laughed.

'Where's Dick going to get the fellows from?' said Arthur. 'That's why I smiled. Jerry Britton is the only one he can rope in, and they live about fifteen miles apart. We are clean Out Back here, you know, Ned. Over the western ranges there'—and Arthur pointed to a line of distant blue hills—'the country is quite unsettled.'

'Is it empty?' asked Ned.

'Not altogether,' said Dick. 'It's empty of stations and runs of course, because it's mostly desert and not worth

taking up. But right over the hills there are plenty of myall blacks, and now and again a prospector rambles into the ranges, fossicking [searching about] for gold.'

At this moment Mr Carew came up from the men's huts.

'Now boys,' he said, 'time to turn in. We're off long before dawn for the west side of the run. We shall have a busy time to-morrow, for Billy tells me the cattle are pretty wild that way.'

'You'd better set Dick to ride a few of 'em, and gentle them a bit, father,' laughed Arthur.

'Ah, Billy's been telling me about the way you handled that big yellow bullock to-day, Dick, my lad,' said the squatter. 'He says you handled him famously. I wish I'd been there to see it. The only fellow I ever saw ride a bullock to a finish was an old black-fellow down on the Riverina. But I don't think it was a very lively brute.'

'My word, father!' cried Arthur, 'but this was lively enough. He was a real terror.'

'I know him,' said Mr Carew. 'I saw him come in, a pretty tough nut to crack, too.—Did he shake you up much, Dick?'

'No, Mr Carew,' replied Dick. 'I feel all right, thank you.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE MUSTER AND THE WILD BLACKS.

AN hour before the dawn every one was astir at Narana. All were busy, and the cook was the busiest man of all, for ration-bags had to be filled on the chance that a night or two must be spent in the far-off scrubs where the wildest cattle lay in covert. So there was a great shovelling into tucker-bags of tea and flour and baking-powder and the black ration sugar which makes a pannikin of tea slip so sweetly down the throat after a tiring day.

Breakfast was despatched, and then the band of stock-riders jumped into the saddle and were off at a brisk trot for the western side of the run, where there were several mobs of cattle which had not been rounded up for some time, and were expected to give trouble.

The expectation did not prove vain. It was late in the afternoon before a big mob of cows, calves, and steers were cut out of a great patch of mulga scrub and headed for the station. Foremost in this work were Dick and Jerry. The latter, burning to show what he could do in the saddle as he had failed on the bullock, rode through the scrub after stray beasts like one possessed.

It is no mean horseman who can go at speed through thick scrub, and Jerry proved himself a useful hand in the saddle that day. And still he was a little behind Dick, not so much because of his skill, but because of his mount. Jerry had a first-rate old camp-horse named Firefly under him, but Dick had his own Whitesock, and at this game Whitesock and his rider moved as if they were one. When a bullock or a wild cow with her calf at heel went through the tangle of trees and ferns and twisting, twining creepers

which laid the cunningest of loops and traps for the leg of the horse or the head of an unwary rider, Whitesock and Dick followed close and hard.

The lightest touch of the hand on the reins, the faintest tap with toe or heel, and Whitesock understood, and turned and wheeled, and finally swooped like a hawk on the runaway. Then would Dick uncoil the long lash of his nine-foot stock-whip, and with a will he put all his strength and skill into a stinging lash which cracked like a pistol-shot and wrapped the end of the thong round the nose of the beast that he followed, causing it to head away from him and along the course he wished it to pursue.

When this mob had been cut out of the scrub and wheeled into close order on the open plain, it was headed for the station and the branding-yard. Three men went back with it; the others turned and rode away to the north-west where another big mob should be found amid some rolling, broken country at the foot of a small range of hills.

The boys went on with the men who were in search of the fresh mob. Ned Campion had never seen such work before, and was immensely interested in it.

‘How do you manage to dodge the trees and branches when you are going at such a speed?’ he asked. ‘It has seemed to me fifty times to-day that you must go bang into something next stride; but you keep on missing and missing by the closest of shaves.’

‘A miss is as good as a mile,’ said Jerry; ‘not but what I’ve come some crumplers now and again afore I got the right hang o’ things.’

‘And I, many a time,’ said Dick.

‘I say, Arthur, some of the fellows in our patrol think they can ride,’ exclaimed Ned; ‘but a turn through the scrub would soon take the shine out of them.’

‘What’s a patrol?’ said Jerry, and Ned and Arthur made it all clear to him.

Jerry fixed his bright blue eyes on each speaker in turn, and listened in silence save for appreciative grunts. When he had got the run of things he drew a deep breath and sighed. 'Sounds budgery,' he said. 'No end good.'

'Just what I think, Jerry,' said Dick. 'I wish there were a few more fellows round here, and we'd get a patrol together.'

'Wouldn't we!' said Jerry. 'My word! we'd be the Kangaroo Patrol, I reckon.'

'Good name, Jerry, old man,' said Dick. 'But whom can we round up?'

'How many must there be in a patrol?' demanded Jerry.

'Generally runs to about six or eight,' replied Ned.

'My word!' said Jerry. 'Six or eight. We should have to ride a long way to yard that lot.'

'Hallo, what's wrong ahead there?' said Dick, whose eyes, just like a black-fellow's, picked up everything without seeming to stare at anything. The boys had been riding together, a couple of hundred yards behind the stockmen, and now every one looked forward to see the two black-fellows, Bismarck and Mr Gladstone, gallop at full speed from a distant patch of gum-trees and bear down on their party. The two blacks had been sent ahead to locate the missing mob, and were now returning.

'How do you know there's anything wrong, Dick?' said Arthur. 'It's only Bizzy and Gladdy. They've found the mob, I expect, and are coming to let us know where it is.'

'Oh,' said Dick quietly, 'they're riding with bigger news than that; I'm sure of it.'

The boys urged on their horses and cantered forward at speed. They joined the main party before the blacks reached it, and were in time to hear the news; for, as Dick suspected, the new-comers had tidings to tell. Bismarck came first, and broke into a flood of broken black chatter, mixed with much grunting and most expressive pantomime.

‘Find um blenty dracks by water-hole, yohi, yohi [yes, yes]. One fella bullock, two fella bullock dead, cut um up, yohi, yohi.’

‘Hello,’ said Billy the stockman, ‘what’s this game? What do you mean, Bizzy? Has some one been killing our bullocks?’

Bismarek nodded and rolled his eyes wildly, and his companion said, ‘One fella, two fella, metancholy [many].’

‘A lot of bullocks dead!’ roared Billy in great surprise, and the blacks nodded in affirmation.

‘Who’s killed ’em?’ roared Billy again.

‘Myall [wild] black-fella, I think, yohi,’ said Bizzy.

‘By Jiminy!’ growled the stockman. ‘I saw the tracks of some niggers a week or two back right out west of our line when I was looking for lost steers; but I didn’t think they’d get up to this game. Well, let’s see what it means.’

The whole party put their horses to a hand-gallop, and, guided by the blacks, rode through the patch of gums, then over a small plain some three miles across, and into a wide gully where scattered scrub-trees grew about a good-sized water-hole.

Exclamations broke from every lip as the riders cantered over the edge of the bank. Along the side of the water-hole were scattered gunyahs (huts) made of bark and branches, and there were also shelters made of boughs in which meat had been hung. The hides of half-a-dozen bullocks, each bearing the Narana brand, lay here and there, and the scent of rotting meat filled the air, for the marauding blacks had killed much more than they wanted, and had left great joints hung on the scrub-trees.

‘I say, Dick,’ cried Arthur, ‘what does this mean?’

‘Wild blacks,’ replied Dick; ‘there’s a mob or two among the ranges, though I’ve never run on to any of them. But they’ve been in among the cattle with their spears right

enough. Look at the cuts in that hide; they mean spear-thrusts.'

'And where are the rest of the beasts?' said Arthur.

'They've driven them off,' replied Dick and Jerry, speaking together. 'See the track running up the gully, straight to the west and the hills.'

The party gathered together and a short consultation was held.

'This here game won't do at all,' growled Billy Weir, who as head-stockman felt a deep responsibility for the safety of the herds of Narana. 'Look at the tracks. They've cleared off wi' forty or fifty bullocks. We must follow 'em up.'

'Right, Billy,' said several voices.

'They ain't far ahead, nayther,' said Old Pete, squinting at the tracks. 'We'll soon be up to 'em.'

'Afore night, d'ye reckon, Pete?' said Billy.

'No; I couldn't say that,' replied the old boundary-rider; 'but we'd get 'em on the jump at dawn. That's a good time to ketch blacks. They lie close by dark always.'

'But what shall we do if they show fight?' asked a stockman. 'They're pretty handy with them spears o' theirs, and I dunno as there's as much as a pistol amongst the lot of us.'

'No, we're not armed,' said Billy; 'but if we lose time to get guns from Narana, they'll get safe among the ranges, and then we may whistle for the bullocks.'

'Don't wait for the dawn,' suggested Dick; 'rush the camp while it's still dark, and make a frightful hullabaloo with shouts and whips. They'll think the "debbil-debbil" is on them, and cut like blazes and leave the beasts.'

'An' that ain't a bad notion, Dick,' said Billy. 'These blacks are always full o' notions as to what evil-sperits is arter' em, and we'll play the game as well as we can. If we can make 'em think it is the "debbil-debbil" there'll be no fightin'. They'll bunk like Billy-o.'

'That's right,' said Old Pete, who knew blacks well; 'and I reckon it 'ud be best to send our best trackers forward to find out where the myalls are camped to-night. Seems to me Dick Barry and the two "boys" 'ud do that bit o' work.'

'Nobody better,' agreed Billy. 'What do you say, Dick? Will ye tek the two blacks wi' ye and smell out wheer these thieves hev' made their camp?'

'Of course I will, Billy,' replied Dick; 'but for the present we can ride straight ahead. We're not near them at present. I've been looking at the tracks, and they're eight or nine hours old.'

'Come on, then,' said Billy; and the party urged on their horses once more, Dick and the two black-trackers riding twenty or thirty yards ahead of the rest.

Upon the edge of dark the pursuers halted, boiled their billies beside a small creek, and ate their supper. Then they rested a few hours until the moon came up, and the pursuit was again continued.

They waited for the moon so that the march could be made as quickly as possible. Its light was not necessary for tracking. Dick could have tracked by touch very easily, for the tribe of blacks, accompanied by their dogs and driving the bullocks, had left a trail which the young bushman and his black companions could easily have followed on the blackest night that ever hid the earth.

An hour before the dawn Dick's keen eyes caught the first sign of the nearness of the enemy. He had cautiously advanced to the crown of a sharp ridge over which the trail ran. Beyond the ridge the land sank away into a deep gully, one side of which was white in the moonlight, the other black in deep shade.

Into the shade Dick peered intently, for he knew no blacks would be camped on the moonlit side—for they fear the rays of the moon—and at last he made out a faint, a very faint spark. Then a fitful glow suddenly sprang up

and died down as a breeze swept the gully, and Dick knew that the wind had fanned hot embers, and that they were near the camp of the wild blacks. He sent Gladdy back at once to the main body to say that the marauders were near, and he himself, closely attended by the second black, crept forward to reconnoitre the sleeping camp.

Dick now moved with the utmost caution. The wild black is as wary as a dingo and as quick to strike as a trodden-on snake, and his weapons are not to be laughed at—a keen spear, which he is prompt to hurl or drive through an enemy's body ; a heavy nulla-nulla, a club which will crack a head as though it were squashing a ripe apple ; a boomerang, which is thrown with tremendous force and unerring precision. Dick was out on a dangerous task, and he knew it, and crept up to the spot with the utmost care, fearing that at any instant one of the gaunt, half-savage dogs would give tongue and rouse the sleeping blacks.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HALF-CASTE.

YARD by yard Dick crept up, and Bismarek followed like a shadow. In the mouth of the gully Dick paused and listened. From the upper end of the deep rift came a confused trampling, and now and again long, heavy breathings and munchings, plainly to be heard in the silence of the night.

‘The bullocks are up beyond the camp,’ thought Dick to himself; ‘very likely the gully ends in a pocket up there, and the beasts are penned in it. I’ll draw round and look over the place from above.’

He turned and laid his hand on the shoulder of the black who lay beside him. He pressed it as if pushing Bismarek back, and a very faint click of the tongue told him that the black-fellow understood the signal for retirement.

Suddenly both dropped and lay still; they had heard a sound of movement a little ahead, and they looked eagerly in that direction. They heard further movements and the rattle of dried sticks, and next a crimson glow began to steal through the darkness of the shadowed air. Presently a tall figure became visible, and Dick saw that they were within thirty yards of a dying camp-fire, which had now been replenished and was burning up briskly. The man who had made it up stood beside it, a big, powerful fellow, well over six feet high, and naked save for the opossum-skin rug which had covered him as he slept, and which was now carelessly flung over one shoulder.

Dick looked at him in wonder, for the black was not black, so to say. He was a yellowish bronze, and, save

for his colour and face, might easily have been taken for a white man.

‘That’s a queer-looking nigger,’ thought Dick. ‘He’s built more like a white, though he’s a real nigger in face and expression.’ And so he was. He had the usual mass of woolly hair, the broad nose, the tangle of black beard spreading over a hairy chest.

‘He’s a half-caste,’ thought the boy ; and then a dim fancy of some old story which he had heard and half-forgotten came into his mind, a story told by his father of a queer old combo who had left civilisation and vanished among these northern hills. A ‘combo’ is a white man who has forsworn his own kind and taken to savage life and savage ways. Often he will marry into a tribe, and become in all save the tint of his skin a genuine black-fellow.

‘This must be a son of the old combo I’ve heard father speak of,’ reflected Dick, and he watched the big fellow closely. At the next moment the boy could scarcely repress an exclamation of surprise, for he saw the half-caste stoop and pick up something from the ground, something which shone and glittered in the firelight—a carbine, a short, strong rifle ; and Dick’s astonishment was greater still when he saw the half-naked savage throw open the breech with easy dexterity, draw the cartridge, glance down the barrel to see all was right, then reload the weapon, close the breech, and throw it into the hollow of his arm with the exact movement of a trained man.

The black-fellow at Dick’s shoulder was as astounded as the boy. Bismarck’s surprise was shown by the faintest sucking of his breath through his teeth ; but Dick caught the sound and understood.

Dick was completely stumped for a moment by this queer development of affairs. Unarmed as they were, it would be a risky thing to jump the camp if the blacks stood merely to their native weapons ; but to find one of these savages

armed with a rifle, and apparently well understanding its mechanism and well able to use it, was a turn of things of which Dick had never dreamed. A single shot might work dire mischief, and the business-like way in which the nigger had squinted down the barrel more than hinted that he knew a trifle about holding a gun straight.

Dick fairly held his breath lest the quick-eared native should catch any hint of his presence, while his busy brain turned the situation over and over, wondering what was best to be done.

At this moment the fire threw up a tall, leaping flame, and Dick saw that it was built within half-a-dozen feet of a bark gunyah, a native hut, and from the hut came the sounds of heavy breathing, denoting that some sleepers lay there. Now the big half-caste took a couple of strides, bent down, crept in under the loose-hanging sheet of bark which formed the door of the gunyah, and disappeared. He had gone back to his repose, and he had taken the carbine with him.

Dick stretched out his hand and felt for his companion ; then he pressed the blackboy's shoulder hard, repeating the signal for retreat. The two scouts crept back as noiselessly as they had advanced.

At first they moved very slowly and cautiously ; but as the distance between them and the camp of the blacks grew they were able to move faster, and soon they were back among their comrades.

Here Dick's report was received with great surprise, and Billy Weir became very uneasy.

'That's no wild black,' said Billy. 'Niver heerd in my life of a myall carryin' a rifle. An' ye say he looked as if he knew how to use it, Dick?'

'He did that, Billy,' replied the boy ; 'handled it as smartly as you could.'

'Jiminy!' grunted Billy. 'I don't like the look o' this.'

'Let's rush 'em just the same,' suggested one of the men ;

'like as not, he'll cut with the rest. Anyhow, he'll only let off a chance shot. It's too dark to take good aim.'

'Not for me,' said Billy promptly, for as head-stockman he felt responsible for the party. 'Not for me, Sam. It's them 'ere chance shots as often do the mischief. I ain't a goin' back to Narana wi' one o' us strung across his saddle, if I kin help it.'

'Wait for daylight an' get 'em on the run,' suggested Old Pete.

'I dunno,' said Billy. 'Daylight, ye see, Pete, will give him a better chance still o' pottin' one o' us. It's a pretty bad fix, this is. We've got nothin' stronger than a stock-whip among the lot o' us, and that don't carry ye fur enough agin' a gun.'

It was not fear which caused Billy to speak like this; it was sheer anxiety. He was as brave a man as ever threw a leg over a saddle, but he hesitated to expose his party to rifle-fire lest some accident should happen. Moreover, his employer's son was one of the party, and Billy was very devoted to Mr Carew. How could he face the man he had served these twenty years if anything were to happen to Arthur? It was no wonder that Billy Weir hesitated. Yet it seemed impossible to let the blacks carry off a mob of bullocks before their very faces. Into the midst of their indecision came a quiet voice.

'Our old plan is the only one, Billy,' said Dick Barry. 'We must get 'em on the jump with a fright.'

'He'll let fly into us for a certainty,' grumbled Billy.

'Oh, I don't mean the way we spoke of at first,' said Dick. 'I'll play the "wood debbil-debbil" on them. I'll bet I can scratch and grunt enough to scare the lives out of 'em. And once I get 'em on the run out of that gunyah they'll start the rest with 'em, and we'll have a chance to get hold of the bullocks.'

Billy was silent for a moment. Then he spoke.

'That means goin' by yerself, Dick,' he said.

'It does,' said Dick cheerfully; 'but that 'll be all right. It won't be the first lot of blacks I've scared wi' that trick. I've done it for fun more 'n once. Now I'll do it in earnest.'

'S'pose he lets fly at the sound through the wall,' objected Billy; 'a bit o' bark 'll no more stop a bullet than a sheet o' paper.'

'Not he,' said Dick; 'no nigger would ever stop to shoot at a "debbil-debbil." He'll bunk for his life.'

Billy was still uncertain about the risk; but Dick was determined to try the plan, and, indeed, there seemed nothing else for it. The wild blacks were known to belong to a very savage and ferocious tribe, and would certainly show fight if they had the chance; and, as has been said, their weapons were by no means to be despised, even if the rifle were left out of account.

So Dick crept softly away to try his luck, and the two blacks followed a little after to render aid in case some difficulty might arise.

Dick's plan was very simple. He meant to personate the wood-demon, an evil spirit in which every wild black most devoutly believes, and whom he most truly fears. There is no more superstitious creature in the world than the Australian black-fellow. To him all nature swarms with evil spirits, and the darkness, above all, holds manifold terrors. No black-fellow will stir an inch from his encampment between dusk and dawn, so that at night he is very easily frightened.

Now among all the dark hosts which hold sway over the mind of the black, none is more dreaded than the wood-demon. They picture this spirit as a horrible creature which is ever in pursuit of them, and haunts every encampment by night. It creeps up to a gunyah, and seeks to gain admittance by scratching. As it scratches it gives unearthly

grunts. Should it make its way in, it passes huge hairy claws over the occupants and tickles them. But let a man laugh under the tickling, and he is lost. The laugh at once gives the demon power over his victims, and he instantly strangles them.

All this may sound very simple, but it is far from simple to the black-fellow. He devoutly and entirely believes it, and Dick knew how deep this belief lay in the heart of the men against whom he was marching. He was a trifle uncertain about the half-caste; but from the man's appearance and actions he felt certain that the big fellow had been reared in the tribe, and it was pretty certain that he was saturated through and through with savage beliefs.

Yard by yard Dick crept on until he caught once more the faint glow of the camp-fire, and knew that he was again approaching the encampment. Now his caution redoubled. A cracking twig, the snap of a withered leaf incautiously trodden on, and he was lost. The blacks would be instantly aroused and the alarm given; no hope of a surprise if they heard the faintest sound of an approaching footstep. Now he bent double and stretched his hands before him. With the utmost care he felt every inch of the ground before setting foot upon it. With quick, light movements he cleared every spot upon which he was about to tread, so that every step was made on the soundless dust; and thus, almost inch by inch, he crept up to the gunyah.

Here he crouched low, holding his breath, and listened. From within came the sounds of deep and regular breathing; the black-fellows inside were fast asleep.

Dick's heart was now beating rather fast. He did not know whether his scratching might be answered by a bullet or not, but he was resolved to have a shot at it; and crooking his fingers, he began to scratch sharply at the sheet of bark wall below which he lay.

Twice he ran his nails over the frail wall, then crouched

flat as a pancake lest he should be answered with a bullet. The blacks awoke instantly. Dick's trained ear told him that. So noiseless, however, were their movements that he felt rather than heard them sit up and cast aside their blankets. He knew their fierce eyes were fixed intently on the point where the fearsome scratching had been heard. Now came the moment. Again he scratched sharply, savagely, and gave a low, sepulchral grunt.

A guttural murmur of terror came from within. The blacks were filled with ghostly alarms. Here was the chosen hour of the wood-demon, the darkness before the dawn, the time when he best loved to prowl in search of the victims he had marked down.

Inside the gunyah three black-fellows and the half-caste sat rigid and frozen with terror. Not for a moment did they dream of aught save their ghostly enemy. Outside, Dick raised his hand and scratched again, scratched so sharply that he shook the frail bark wall, and grunted louder still, a hollow, dreadful grunt which seemed to come from some one already within the gunyah, for Dick had put his mouth to a crack in the sheet of bark.

This was too much for the terrified natives. Into every mind shot a single thought, that at the next moment the dreadful hairy claws would be felt creeping over the naked skin, and with a united yell of terror the savages leapt to their feet and burst open the light door, and fled howling along the line of gunyahs where the rest of the tribe lay.

Their cries roused the others instantly, and their chattering voices told the cause of their terror. This terror at once became general, and the gunyahs were deserted. Helter-skelter went the whole crowd of blacks, men, women, and children, in full flight from the dreaded demon, and in a trice they were streaming at full speed up the moonlit side of the gully, making for their native scrub to hide themselves.

Dick gave an immense chuckle of joy and sprang to his

feet. With a vigorous kick he burst in the bark wall and sprang into the gunyah. The door was broken down, the firelight was streaming in, and there lay the carbine, deserted by its owner in this moment of panic fear. The boy caught up the weapon, fired a shot over the heads of the flying blacks, and shouted with all his might, 'Come on, Billy !' And in a few moments up came Billy and the rest, yelling and cracking their stock-whips furiously, their horses' feet pounding on the dry, hard earth like thunder. At this sudden uproar in their rear the hurrying blacks were seized with fresh terror and raced on faster still, until the last form was hidden among the clumps of mulga which covered the opposite slope.

'Splendid, Dick, my lad !' cried the head-stockman. 'But what about that rifle ?'

'We've got it,' replied Dick ; 'the half-caste cut and left it.'

'Dick, you're a king,' laughed Arthur Carew, who was leading Whitesock. 'You brought that off in great style ;' and the stockmen gave the clever young bushman a rousing cheer, then dashed up the gully in search of the bullocks.

The latter had ceased their feeding upon hearing the noise below them, and were bunched together, snorting with uneasiness, pawing the ground, and tossing their horns. In a trice they were rounded up, for the moonlight shone clearly on the open space where the animals had been browsing, and then they were started full gallop down the gully, the swift stock-horses following hard on their heels ; while whips cracked, and the delighted stockmen cheered and yelled and sent the flying herd faster still.

So they swept on past the deserted gunyahs, where red sparks were sent up in clouds as hoofs beat out the ashes of the dying fires ; through the mouth of the gully and out on the open plain, where the riders spread out fanlike and kept the racing bullocks easily on the line which they

wished them to take ; and so they galloped until moonlight melted into dawn and up leapt the sun, and in an instant, as it seemed, the hot, bright day was upon them.

Billy now counted the rescued bullocks and found that sixteen were missing. 'They've had a pretty good buster, that lot Dick started,' remarked the head-stockman. 'About fifty of 'em, I should reckon 'em at, and they've made tucker o' sixteen good fat beasts. Well, it might ha' been a lot worse.'

'I say,' said Dick suddenly, 'this is a police gun.'

As he rode he had been carefully scanning for the first time the carbine he had seized at the blacks' camp.

'A police gun!' cried Arthur. 'How do you know, Dick?'

'Look at the marks on it,' replied Dick.

'Hand it over,' said Old Pete. 'I once did three years in the Mounted Police. I know a police carbine when I see it.'

Dick handed it over, and Old Pete pronounced that it was a service weapon.

'How in the name o' thunder did it get into the hands o' a wanderin' black out in the ranges here?' wondered the old stockman as he turned it over. 'An' mind yer, this is no old cast-off; it's a good new tool, an' in fust-rate order too.'

The thing was very mysterious, and no one could explain it. The stockmen talked it over all ways as they drove the bullocks before them towards Narana ; but no one had ever heard before of a myall nigger who had a rifle and kept it in good order.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SWIMMING MATCH.

BUT soon all minds were turned from the police rifle to the business in hand, for the bullocks began to resent driving, and started to break away right and left for favourite feeding-grounds. This called for swift riding to stop the rushes, and here Jerry dashed about more recklessly than any one. He was riding a big, raw-boned, chestnut colt, noted for his bursts of buck-jumping, and a mount that several of the men fought shy of. But Jerry, anxious to show what he could do in the saddle, as he had failed with the bullock, had claimed Redskin for himself, and was riding the big, hard-mouthed brute with masterly skill. Time and again he cut off the swiftest gallopers, for Redskin could go at a tremendous speed, and old Billy's shout of 'Good boy, Jerry!' was music in Jerry's ears. He had felt much disgruntled over his failure, and was greatly cheered when he headed another rider and showed that he was a nailing good hand at a muster.

The heat of the day proved terrific, and the fiercest of it was spent near a water-hole, a pool left in the bed of a creek, where they camped for a few hours. The men were set in turn two by two to watch the bullocks. But the poor beasts were now pretty well exhausted by the march in the dreadful heat and by their own exertions to break away, and gave but little trouble.

The four boys made a little camp for themselves, built their own fire, boiled their tea, ate their beef and cold damper, for plenty of rations were carried by a steady old pack-horse, and then sat on the bank beside the water to chat.

'What's the name of your patrol, Arthur?' said Dick.

'We are the Emus,' replied Arthur.

'And we're the Kangaroos, an' don't you forget it,' said Jerry promptly.

The boys laughed, and Dick remarked, 'I'm afraid we'll be a bit of a lone patrol, Jerry.'

'Never mind,' said Jerry; 'this country'll open up a bit before long, an' then we'll muster a few more chaps, an' rig up the full number.'

'Who's going to be patrol leader?' chuckled Ned. 'There are two officers, leader and sergeant. You can have one job apiece, and make a real swell patrol of it; not a private in it.'

'Ah,' said Jerry seriously, 'we've got to talk about that, Dick Barry. Who's goin' to boss the show? I dunno whether you reckon you ought to get fust pick o' the job because that bullock pounded my leg and then got me off.'

'Not a bit of it, Jerry,' said Dick; 'it was just your bad luck that time. We'll leave that question alone for a while.'

'All right, then,' said Jerry; 'here we are wi' nothin' to do for a bit. I'm for a challenge, I am.'

'Jerry,' said Arthur, 'you're great on challenges.'

'Always was,' replied Jerry briefly; 'but now, see, here it is. The Kangaroo patrol challenges the Emus to swim from the top of this water-hole to the bottom and back again. First man home wins the match for the patrol.'

'Good idea, Jerry,' cried Arthur; 'it's a real sporting challenge.—We're on, Ned, eh?'

'We are,' said Ned, who was a capital swimmer; and the boys began to strip at once.

The stockmen were much interested in the match, and seated themselves at ease on the bank where the race was to begin and end, prepared to cheer the swimmers and acclaim the winner. Old Pete volunteered to be starter,

and the signal to dive in was to be the crack of his stock-whip.

The boys placed themselves in line and stood with hands joined over their heads. Crack! went the whip, and the four white, slim bodies shot perfectly together into the deep, dark water which lay below the bank.

Jerry swam the side-stroke, the other three the breast, and at first Jerry forged ahead rapidly. After him came Arthur and Ned, and last of all was Dick, the latter swimming a long, slow, steady stroke which he could keep up from beginning to end—a stroke which would tell in the last third of the course.

The four heads bobbed steadily along, and soon a white body was emerging at the bottom of the water-hole. Each swimmer had to climb right out, dive back again, and return to complete the course.

‘Jerry’s first so far,’ cried the onlookers; ‘he’s a good twenty yards ahead of the others.’

So he was, and as Jerry shot in and swam swiftly back, passing the rest while they were a good ten or a dozen yards from the shore, he felt very satisfied with himself. But midway up the water-hole things did not look quite such plain sailing. Jerry’s fast stroke had begun to pump him, and glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Ned was coming up steadily. Jerry spurted, then looked back again. Another head was away to the right, not far from Ned’s, and it was Dick Barry’s; so the race was not yet lost to the Kangaroos. But Jerry wanted to secure the win for himself, and he pegged away harder than ever. Some of the stockmen had come to meet them, and were now running along the bank encouraging the racers with shouts and yells and cracking of stock-whips.

Up and up came Ned, and at last he was level with Jerry, and Dick barely a yard behind. Arthur was quite out of it by now, and was paddling gently along far in the rear.

Suddenly the race was interrupted. Ned, rising on his strong breast-stroke, caught sight of something a short distance ahead.

‘What’s that?’ he cried. ‘There, just in front of us.’

It did not look much; merely a small, narrow head, moving gently but quickly along, with the water in its wake slightly disturbed in a gentle ripple.

Jerry struck a deep stroke, raised himself in the water, and looked; then burst into a yell of alarm and warning.

‘What’s that?’ he gasped. ‘Why, it’s sudden death! Wongé! Wongé! [deadly snake]. Strike for the bank! Quick!—quick!’

Jerry was right. For the creature moving towards them was the dreaded gray snake, a most deadly reptile, the touch of whose fangs is death, and a creature which is as much at home in the water as it is when lying coiled under a log.

Billy Weir caught sight of it at the same moment, and began to yell like one possessed. ‘Gray snake! Gray snake! In with ye, boys! Holy powers, he’s coming straight for ye!’

The three boys—for Arthur was far behind and safe—struck for the bank with all their might. The gray snake is a reptile to be feared beyond ordinary. Most snakes, even of the deadliest kind, will get out of the way if they have a chance. But the gray is a born fighter. He will dash from under a log or bush at speed, and woe betide the beast or man whose legs he can reach! For he fights to kill. One touch of those deadly fangs, and the victim dies in terrible agony.

The fugitives knew this, and their race for fun became upon the instant a race for life. Dick was the nearest to the bank, and he was ashore while his companions were still a good twenty yards away. The bank was a trifle

steep, but Billy Weir held down his whip, and Dick gripped the stout thong and swung himself up.

Then he turned to see how his friends were faring. Jerry and Ned were swimming with all their might; but Jerry was leading, for Ned had been farthest out in the pool. Not five yards behind Ned came the little, narrow, gray head, its wicked, glittering, bead-like eyes sparkling with anger as it pursued the fugitives. It swam fast and was gaining steadily on Ned, who was feeling the race too much to be able to reach his top speed.

'Do a bit more, Ned,' howled Billy, 'or he'll git ye—ay, he'll git ye for sure.'

The boy caught the words, and his white face became whiter still. He did not dare to glance back to see how near was death at his shoulders, but he made a frenzied effort to improve his speed. In vain. His weary arms could not draw a stronger stroke.

'Holy powers,' groaned Billy, 'the confounded sarpiant 'ull git him! An' what's to be done?'

Dick glanced round and made a swift leap. His quick mind had told him what was to be done, and he was in search of a weapon. He gave a grunt of joy as he saw the very thing. A few yards along the bank was a blackened patch and a few odd sticks, the remnants of an old camp-fire. He darted there and caught up a blackened brand, a short, heavy stick hardened by fire.

'Good for you, Ned,' cried Billy; 'twill make a fust-rate throwin'-stick.'

Yes; the club would make a first-rate throwing-stick, and it was in the hands of one who could throw like a black-fellow. Many and many a time had Dick knocked a pigeon off a tree or fetched down a kangaroo-rat as it ran, and now he poised the stick, and hung for a second on his aim, while Billy waited breathlessly.

Whiz! the stick flew skimming across the water, passed

within eighteen inches of Ned's head, and struck the tiny mark fair and square.

'Glory be!' howled Billy. 'Hit him smack! Good throw, Dick, lad! Easy does it, Ned; easy does it. Yer inimy's gone under.' But Ned did not ease his furious efforts till he was beside the bank and swarming to dry land with the aid of Billy's whip. Jerry was already ashore, and Arthur had landed farther down, and now came running up the bank.

'How goes it?' shouted Arthur as he ran up. 'Where is the beast?'

'Down among the dead men,' replied Billy. 'Dick settled the brute wi' a throwin'-stick. An' it's lucky he's got a good eye, or Ned would ha' been caught, sure enough.'

'I say, Dick, old chap,' said Ned, gasping at his words, 'you saved my life. If that gray snake had got up to me!' and the boy shuddered at the thought of the deadly fangs being driven home in his shoulders.

'It's nothing to talk about,' said Dick. 'I hit him a lucky clip, and that's my good turn to-day. Scout's job, you know.'

Dick had picked up this talk from Arthur, and the boys laughed at hearing Dick get off the scout-talk in such correct style.

Ned thanked his rescuer again and again; but Dick slapped him on the shoulder and said, 'That's all right. You'd have done just the same for me. Now we'll get into our togs; Billy's ready to start.'

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ACCIDENT.

IN a few minutes again the head-stockman gave the word to move on once more, and girths were tightened and legs swung over saddles, and the herd headed again for Narana, which place they hoped to reach by dark, for Old Pete was steering for home in a line as straight as a bee makes for its hive.

Within an hour after they left the water-hole a very exciting incident occurred, in which Dick and Jerry were the two leading figures, though this time it was no challenge or matter of rivalry. At one point of the track their way lay along a small tableland of the range, a tableland bounded upon one side by a steep precipice of basalt rock, not very high, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet; but the drop was perpendicular, and anything going over it would certainly be dashed to pieces on the huge boulders which lay thickly at the foot of the wall-like cliff.

‘Steady, boys; steady,’ said Billy. ‘Keep the bullocks well away from the cliff. There’s some of ’em a’most wild enough to jump bang over if we don’t work ’em along easy and careful.’

The heat and the sensation of being driven, a thing they had never known before, for these were scrub-cattle, had rendered some of the bullocks almost frantic, and when they made a rush they made it madly, not caring whither they went.

But the clever stockmen lined themselves out between the beasts and the cliff-edge, and worked them past the dangerous place and headed them safely for a long slope

which led down from the tableland to a wide plain below. On the edge of the slope were some thick clumps of gidyah-trees, and a big sandy-coloured bullock suddenly broke and went for them, his instinct telling him that cover was there to be found. Jerry loosed Redskin's head, and away went the big, rangy chestnut at a cracking pace. In two-twos Redskin was alongside the runaway, and then Jerry's whip curled round Sandy's nose, and about went the fugitive and galloped back to his companions.

But now it was seen that though Jerry had easily mastered and turned the bullock, he was not going so easily to resume control of his horse. Redskin had been given his head to follow the runaway, and now he meant to keep it. The powerful chestnut had been fretting and fighting for his bit time after time ; but now he made a most furious effort to master his rider. Suddenly he started his buck-jumping. First he reared on end, then dropped like lightning, tucked himself in till nose and tail seemed to meet, and shot into the air like a big ball bouncing high from the hard ground. On the apex of the arch which Redskin made of himself sat Jerry, calm and unconcerned, having lost nothing of his seat, nothing of his nerve, nothing indeed save his cabbage-tree hat, which had flown away as the big chestnut shot his full length high into the air.

For full five minutes Redskin gave as tremendous an exhibition of bucking as one could wish to see ; but Jerry stuck as tight to the saddle as if he had been lashed there, and the stockmen laughed and shouted and cheered the cool, plucky rider. Then a nasty accident happened. Redskin had been bounding here and there, for the most part in a small open space between two gidyah-trees. After a while he stopped and stood snorting and panting, the foam dripping from his jaws, those jaws which Jerry had been holding with a grip into which he put all the power of his strong, wiry arms.

'He's done his bit, Jerry,' laughed one of the onlookers.

'Not he,' said Jerry quietly. 'He's only taking a rest. He'll begin again in a minute. Let him. I'll take it out o' him, an' have a quiet ride back to the station.'

Jerry was right. Within thirty seconds Redskin gave a sudden, furious, sideways leap which would have pitched an ordinary rider flying. Jerry swayed a little, and was stiff and straight again in an instant. Another sideways leap and a big buck. Jerry sat like a rock. A third sideways leap and the big chestnut coiled himself for another huge buck, and at that moment a roar of warning burst from the onlookers. 'Look out, Jerry! Duck, Jerry! Duck your head!'

The last side-leap had carried Redskin under a low-hanging branch, a stout limb a good twelve inches through. As the warning shout rang out the big chestnut rose in his furious bound. Intent upon his horse's movement, Jerry had never glanced up, and the warning came too late. Crack! the boy's head was driven against the huge branch with stunning force, and as Redskin dropped to earth again Jerry swung and swayed dizzily in the saddle. But he did not fall. His superb horsemanship, even in this strait, kept him in the saddle, and his long legs continued to grip with instinctive clutch the bony barrel of the chestnut colt.

But Redskin had got his head now, and he knew it. No sooner were his hoofs on the ground than he whirled round on his haunches and bolted, bolted at terrific speed back across the tableland.

'Stop him! Stop him!' shouted Billy Weir. 'Jerry can't hold him now. The lad's knocked silly.'

'Arter him, lads; arter him!' roared old Pete. 'Merciful powers, the brute's a-headin' straight for the bluff! Did yer see his eyes? Redskin's mad. He'll pitch straight over!'

The old stockman was right. The chestnut's eyes shone

with that terrible blue light which shows that a horse has reached the utmost pitch of fury, when its only aim is to rush forward at blindest, maddest speed, careless whether or no it bears itself and its rider to utter destruction. And Redskin was heading straight for the precipice and the awful drop on the basalt crags below.

CHAPTER XV.

JERRY'S PERIL.

IN a trice all spurs were driven home, and Jerry's friends were urging their horses at top speed in pursuit of the runaway. But one horse had felt no spur, and that was the foremost of them all. Dick had been the first to see the danger, the first to shout, and when he saw that the warning was too late, had been the first to gallop to Jerry's assistance. But he had been standing on the far side of the gidyah clump, and by the time Whitesock was stretching into her gallop the chestnut was well away from the trees. Billy Weir was well mounted on a big bay, nearly thoroughbred, and for the first half-mile he hung well on Dick's quarter. But weight soon told its tale, and the boy on his splendid little black forged steadily ahead of the big stockman. The rest were strung out behind, but all riding like mad, and shouting advice and warning to Jerry.

'Chuck yerself off, Jerry!' bellowed Billy. 'Chuck yerself off! Ye'll never stop Redskin now. The mad beggar's bound to go bang over. Chuck yerself off!'

But there was no response from the figure ahead. Neither sign nor sound did Jerry make, only seemed to be crouching oddly on the chestnut's withers, and faster, faster, ever faster, the great leggy colt swept across the sandy flat, straight, straight for the frightful leap into space which could be the only end of that mad gallop.

Could he be headed off? If so, there was only one rider there that could do it, and Dick knew that he was that rider. The rest were beaten already, and only Whitesock's wonderful speed could bring a rescuer alongside the big mad brute that was whirling Jerry along to his destruction.

Dick sat tight down to his saddle, took Whitesock by the head, and sent the game little beast along as he had never sent him before. It was the first time they had raced for a life, and a tremendous race they made of it. The little black horse seemed to know. He answered his master's heel, hand, and voice as if he understood the fearful urgency of the moment. Yard by yard he cut down the chestnut's lead, and yard by yard he drew away from the racing stockmen, until it seemed to Dick as if none save himself and Jerry were crossing the flat at this break-neck speed. On and on raced Whitesock, gaining, gaining with every stride, and Dick breathed a sigh of relief. He would be up with the chestnut before the edge of the bluff was gained, and Jerry would be saved. Soon he was close on the quarter of the runaway.

'Jerry—Jerry,' yelled Dick, 'gather up your reins! Take a pull at his head!'

For to Dick's immense surprise the reins were hanging loose on the big colt's neck. That was the reason of Jerry's strange, crouching attitude. He was clutching at the front of the saddle, and this clutch, with the instinctive grip of his legs, was maintaining him in his seat. The truth was that the frightful blow on the head had rendered Jerry quite incapable of thinking for himself; he could only snatch at some support and hang on while he was borne forward by the maddened chestnut—whither, he knew not.

Twice or thrice Dick shouted, but Jerry made no reply, gave no sign that he had heard.

'My Colonial!' muttered Dick. 'That crack on the nut has knocked Jerry clean out. I must get hold of those reins myself.'

He called on Whitesock for a fresh burst, and the good little nag answered nobly. Up he went stride by stride, got his nose against the chestnut's quarter, then got it by Jerry's leg, then forged ahead and got it by the runaway's shoulder.

Now Dick leaned forward and made a grab at the dangling reins. He seized them with a shout of triumph.

Alas! his joyful shout was cut short by a groan of bitter disappointment. For the chestnut had got the bit fixed in his iron jaws, and, angered afresh by Dick's pull, leapt out with a savage spring, which snatched the leather from the boy's hand and left Whitesock three good yards behind.

Dick looked ahead, and his heart began to thump in his body like a trip-hammer. They were barely three hundred yards from the edge of the cliff. Redskin had got the lead again, and was going for the sheer drop as straight as a bullet from a gun, and Jerry, poor, dazed Jerry, made no move to save himself, no reply to Dick's wild cries.

'Jerry! Jerry! Jerry!' yelled Dick, but all in vain. Jerry's face was white under its tan, and a trickle of blood was running from his hair and streaming down his cheek.

'Come on, Whitesock!' called Dick. 'Come on! We must get up again;' and Whitesock did his very best and strained madly on the chestnut's quarter, but, as it seemed, all in vain. Again Dick shot a look ahead, and his heart thumped faster still. At the terrific pace at which they were now covering the ground, it was a matter of seconds before the edge of the cliff would be gained. He could see over the precipice. The country below was opening out, and the sensation of whirling through the air to a sickening fall came over him with horrible distinctness.

Now he heard a voice yelling behind. It was Billy Weir. 'Pull up, lad; pull up! Ye'll never catch the chestnut now, an' it'll be two over instead o' one. Pull up, lad! Ye've done your best. Pull up, then!'

Dick never turned his head nor checked Whitesock's flying speed. He sat for an instant in his saddle, looked coolly over the narrow space before him, and glanced at the chestnut. Would Redskin swerve at the last? No, he would not. The colt was going as straight as an arrow for

the square-cut edge of the bluff. The light of madness blazed in his eye as fiercely as ever, and whoever and whatever remained alive and sound on the cliff, it was certain that his body would be dashed to pieces on the iron rocks below.

Then Dick sat down again tight, took Whitesock by the head, and called on him again for one last burst.

Forty yards behind, Billy gave a groan of despair. 'They're done for, both of 'em,' he cried aloud; 'done for! There ain't room to pull up now. An' Dick's after him, faster than ever. Good lad, brave lad; but he's throwing his life away.'

Billy knew that it was useless for him to follow another inch. The tragedy would have run its course long before he could gain the edge of the precipice. He drew rein and watched with staring eyes as the two horses, now locked together, raced to the brink of the sheer descent.

'Ah!' The cry was drawn from Billy as if he had felt the shock of a sudden blow. He saw the chestnut rising to the leap into the yawning gulf. Out he shot, spurning the last cloud of dust from his heels, and vanished into the depths. Billy's eyes opened wider still, and his jaw dropped. Yet it was amazement, not horror, which held him spell-bound.

For he had seen a feat of horsemanship which, of the hundreds of feats he had seen, was easily first. Only a rider with perfect command of his steed, of unflinching coolness and undaunted nerve, could have performed it. The last burst of the noble little black had carried him up to the saddle where Jerry was crouching and swaying. Then, at the very brink of the frightful fall, Dick had dropped his reins, swung forward, flung his arms round Jerry's waist, and dragged his friend from the saddle. A sharp word to Whitesock and the little nag had 'propped,' as the stockmen say. That is to say, it had pulled up dead-short on its haunches, propping itself from slipping forward

with stiffened fore-legs, and there on the top of the chasm stood the black with heaving flanks and snorting in terror as he looked into the gulf, where the chestnut already lay in a mangled heap. In the saddle sat Dick, white and breathless after that terrific run and the tremendous exertion of the crowning feat which closed it, and Jerry, rescued Jerry, hung limply in his arms.

'Back, Whitesock,' said Dick, and the little horse gathered himself together and backed three or four steps as carefully as if his intelligence had been human. Then he turned and walked quietly away from the edge of the cliff.

Up galloped Billy, who had sent the bay on again, and sprang down and ran to take Jerry. Dick let his friend slip from his arms, then raising them, breathed a long sigh of relief.

'Dick!—Dick!' cried Billy, and could say no more. The old stockman was speechless in wonder and admiration. But his silence, his voice choking in his excitement, was even more eloquent than speech. Dick understood.

'It was touch-and-go that time, Billy!' he said with a smile on his pale face. 'I don't wonder if it's made you feel a bit queer. Didn't want to lose two old friends at once, did you?'

'Never did want to lose ye, anyhow, Dick,' cried Billy Weir, finding his voice again; 'always had a fancy for ye, an' for Jerry too, with all his blunderin' ways. But this gits me. If it ain't just the dead-finish! Wouldn't ha' believed it if I hadn't ha' seen it wi' my own eyes. Luggin' him out o' the saddle, an' proppin' the nag just on the edge o' the drop. Well, if it worn't the dead-finish!' And Billy could say no more. Then up swept the others, who had been left well behind by the swifter riders, and a rapturous cheer was raised as it was seen that Jerry was safe, and nothing lost save the furious colt. But when they went to the edge of the cliff and saw where Whitesock's fore-feet

had been set, and saw the dead chestnut below, and Billy had said how Jerry was saved, they whistled or exclaimed or were silent, each according to his nature, and Dick was looked upon with the grave respect which among stock-riders is given at once to a prince of horsemen.

And what of Jerry? He was staring at the sand, rubbing his head at the spot where that tremendous crack had made it very sore. It was some time before he came fully to himself, and then he knew nothing of what had happened. His only memory was a confused notion of the chestnut bolting; of losing his reins, though not his stirrups; and of hanging on in some fashion or another until he was dragged from the saddle. How, he knew not.

But when he understood what Dick had done, Jerry's face was a sight to see. His eyes opened and his long face pulled out longer still. For a few moments he said nothing; then he blurted out, 'Well, Dick, this settles it. You're the leader. I'm No. 2, whatever that is;' and so the officers of the Kangaroo Patrol, otherwise the Lone Patrol, were settled once and for all.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COMING OF SERGEANT BLAKE.

OUR story now moves on to a day three weeks later when the Lone Patrol were gathered on the veranda of Ballamoola, with their backs to the slab wall, their legs stretched out on the earthen floor, and every member limp with the fearful heat of a baking noon. They numbered three altogether; for Dick, after careful study of *Scouting for Boys*, which Arthur had given to him, had taken in their blackboy, Prince Jack. The latter was about Dick's age, as far as any one knew, but much smaller, and was a cheerful little nigger, with the broadest of noses, the biggest of smiles, and the brightest of dark, glittering eyes.

He had received his name in this way. One stormy day, a dozen years before, a small band of blacks camped near the house in which the Barrys were then living. Their leader bore a large tin plate hung round his neck, and on this plate was inscribed 'King Jack.' The next day they moved on, leaving a rude gunyah standing, and Mr Barry, riding by, heard a feeble cry coming from the gunyah. He looked in, and found a tiny blackboy left there, stuffed in an old dilly-bag. Why he had been deserted was never discovered; but there he was.

Mr Barry took him home, and he grew up about the place. As his father was probably King Jack, Mr Barry called him Prince Jack, and that was soon shortened to Jacky. Now he was Dick's faithful follower and servant, and worth his weight in gold as a tracker and bushman. No fear of losing horse, bullock, or sheep if Jacky was on

hand. There is among all blacks—save those who have been utterly demoralised by drink and loafing round towns—a very high level of bush knowledge; but here and there some stand above the rest, as trees stand above brushwood; and the blackboy Mr Barry had picked up and saved out of sheer humanity was one of these.

When Dick had proposed to enlist Jacky in the patrol Jerry had looked rather dubious.

‘I dunno about a nigger, ye know,’ said Jerry. ‘Of course I ain’t got anythin’ against Jacky. He’s a real Al nigger; but, then, he is a nigger.’

‘He’s a British subject,’ said Dick; ‘and besides that, they had some black-trackers over in Africa at the big war. Well, if the blacks are good enough to use in the British army, they’re good enough to go into a Boy Scout’s patrol.’

‘Sounds like sense,’ admitted Jerry. ‘Well, we’ll have him in. It’ll make it a bit less lonesome.’

So they had him in, and though it was not a very big patrol yet, as there was not another boy within close upon forty miles, it was as big as they could make it.

Suddenly Jerry drew in his feet. The sun had been working slowly round an angle of the veranda, and was falling on his boots and making things very uncomfortably hot for the feet inside.

‘Hot enough to fry ye alive to-day,’ said Jerry. ‘Dick, I wonder if it’ll ever rain again!’

‘Seems to me I’ve forgotten what a wet day is like,’ replied Dick. ‘Fancy standing out in the rain and feeling it cool and damp on your face, and the creeks a-filling and the cattle a-sucking in all they want to drink!’

All were silent for a moment at the thought of such delights. Then Jerry said, ‘How’s yer stock doin’?’

‘Jolly bad,’ replied Dick. ‘We’ve lost more than half of ’em.’

'So have we,' said Jerry. 'Seems to me this drought's goin' to be a perisher!'

Silence again as the three boys looked across the burning plain. Then the blackboy gave a grunt.

'What is it, Jacky?' asked Dick.

'Mine think it yarramen [horses] come,' said the blackboy, his glittering eyes fixed on a distant ridge. Dick and Jerry looked closely; but keen as their eyes were, for a time they could see nothing. At last they made out a faintish blur on the far-off yellow slope. The blur grew and grew until they could see that it was a cloud of dust, and they knew that it was thrown up by galloping horses.

'Who's comin'?' cried Jerry; and the boys sprang to their feet, for the advent of any stranger is a very exciting thing on a lonely Out-Back station.

'Troopers,' cried Dick in a moment, as his quick eye caught the flash of accoutrements.

'The police!' said Jerry. 'What's up? Who are they after?'

'We'll soon know,' replied Dick; 'they're coming straight here. Good job I got some water in this morning;' and he glanced up at the big, plump water-bag hanging in a corner of the veranda.

On came the riders, and Dick cried, 'Why, it's Sergeant Blake and a black-tracker! The Sergeant was this way about three months ago on his rounds. There's something wrong. He doesn't come so often as this.'

Five minutes later two horsemen cantered up and drew rein before the house.

'Hallo, Sergeant!' cried Dick; 'you're this way again?'

'That's it, Dick, my lad,' said Sergeant Blake. 'Is your father at home?'

'No,' said Dick. 'He's out after water, and I'll go bail a drop of that wouldn't come amiss to you.'

The Sergeant tapped his empty water-bag significantly, and Dick sprang to give him a drink.

'Ah, that's no end good,' murmured Sergeant Blake after he had slowly, very slowly, drained the cup. 'No; no more, thank you. I have to do a perish too often to drink as much as I'd like.'

To 'do a perish' is to cross a foodless, waterless stretch of country in the best way a traveller can, and the Sergeant had learned that to restrict one's self in drinking is the very best way of enduring an extreme of thirst if the necessity should arise.

Dick next offered the black-tracker a drink, and the man took it thankfully, but with a shaking hand. The tracker was a splendid specimen of the Native Mounted Police, a big, straight, clean-built fellow, six feet two in his stockings, and looking very smart and soldierly in his neat regimentals of dark-blue cloth striped with red. But very suddenly he was seized with a trembling fit, which shook him from head to foot, and caused him to spill a few drops of the precious water.

'Hello!' said Jerry; 'he's got 'em bad.'

'He has,' agreed the Sergeant; 'but he's a good plucked un, is Tarbox. He's kep' in the saddle where many a one 'ud ha' given it up long ago.'

At this moment Mrs Barry, hearing a strange voice, came out. The Sergeant was an old acquaintance of hers, and they exchanged hearty greetings.

'But what's the matter with your man?' asked Mrs Barry. 'It looks to me as if he has got a bad touch of fever on him.'

'That's it, ma'am,' replied Sergeant Blake; 'poor old Tarbox has got about as bad a fit o' the "shakes" as a man can have.'

The big tracker was livid under his black, and shook so that his teeth rattled in his head.

'Poor fellow,' said Mrs Barry; 'he can't travel in that state.'

'He can't, Mrs Barry, and that's a fact!' said Blake. 'I don't know what I'm going to do with him, or without him. He'd soon be better if he could lie up for a day or two.'

'Well, he can do that here,' said Mrs Barry; 'he can go down to the blacks' huts and stay there as long as he likes. My husband and our two blackboys will be home in an hour or two, and then the boys will see to him better than any white doctor.'

'So they will,' agreed the Sergeant; 'and you're very kind, Mrs Barry. Well, that settles what I'm going to do with him; but it doesn't settle what I'm going to do without him. You see, I'm bound for country I've never travelled before, and Tarbox is a rare good tracker. I'll be clean stumped without him.'

'Where are you making for, Sergeant?' asked Dick.

'Why, I'm under orders to scout up the far reaches of the Bunya River,' replied Blake. 'A bunch of Chinkies [Chinamen] passed our station, and said they'd had a lot of trouble wi' bad myalls, and they'd cleared out. But they'd got a long story about a couple of prospectors as seem in consid'ble danger, for one of 'em was too ill to shift when the Chinkies hooked it, and it isn't likely t'other chap 'ud leave his mate.'

'Not likely,' echoed Dick and Jerry, for they knew how staunchly a pair of mates stand by each other in the bush.

'Well, so I'm going up there to see how things stand,' continued the police-officer; 'and I took Tarbox wi' me because he knows the country, and now he's got the shakes about as bad as he can have 'em.'

'And you want to push on at once?' cried Dick.

'I do,' said Blake.

'Well, then,' returned Dick, 'you'd better take Jacky.'

He can put you on the Bunya River as well as anybody. I'd come myself, only father will want me to-morrow to help him to drive a mob of bullocks down to Narana, if we can get 'em that far.'

'Pretty bad time for sellin' bullocks, ain't it?' remarked Blake.

'It's either getting a little for 'em, or seeing 'em die on the range,' said Dick. 'We're just about done for on Ballamoola; we've had no grass for weeks, and the mulga is just about finished. There's a bite down at Narana, and Mr Carew's promised to take 'em just to help us.'

'Ay, he's a good sort, is Mr Carew,' said Blake. 'Well, if you'll let me have the boy I'll be very much obliged, an' I reckon I'll be back well inside of four days.'

Dick nodded, and said a few words to Jacky, who ran off to make preparations. An hour later Sergeant Blake and Jacky rode away with water and tucker bags filled afresh by Mrs Barry; and at the heels of Jacky's horse trotted Snip, a brindled cattle-dog which the blackboy had reared and trained himself.

Soon after they had gone Mr Barry rode up from the opposite direction, urging before him the mob of bullocks which were to go to Narana. Dick and Jerry went to meet them, and Jerry, who had not seen the beasts at Ballamoola lately, whistled in sorrow and dismay. The poor creatures were terribly gaunt and lean. Famine stared from their wild eyes, and their bones stood out with a horrible distinctness under the skin drawn tightly over hips and ribs.

Jerry shook his head. 'My word, Mr Barry!' he said, 'I thought our beasts looked bad enough; but it's a bit worse with you, I see.'

'About as bad as it can be, Jerry,' replied the master of the station, a big, brown-faced, bearded man. 'They can just stand on their legs, you see, and that's about all there is to it.'

‘Never mind,’ said Dick cheerfully ; ‘we’ll get ’em to Narana to-morrow, and they’ll soon pick up there.’

‘I’ll stop an’ help ye,’ said Jerry ; ‘there’s nothin’ much doin’ at our place now.’

So that night the two boys slept in Dick’s room, and were up next morning well before dawn in order to make an early start for Narana.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST OF THE HERD—A STRANGE MESSAGE.

AS soon as there was light to see the track Mr Barry and the two boys rounded up the starving herd, and headed the bullocks for the distant station at an easy walk. By the time they had gone five miles the heat was terrific. The poor feeble beasts went very slowly, and a patch of rocky country rising on a long, steady slope to a ridge caused them to go slower still. In the midst of this stretch, where the heat of the sun was reflected from the boulders and sheets of rock as if a fire were blazing below ground, a big bullock dropped. Dick was the nearest to him. The boy galloped up, leapt from the saddle, and tried to get the bullock on his feet again. In vain. The bright eye glazed fast, the sobbing breath was drawn more and more slowly, and in a few moments the great, gaunt beast was dead.

‘My word!’ said Jerry, and looked up. A second before the sky had been clear in every direction. Now a bird of prey, a big vulture, hung on hovering wings right above the dead beast. It seemed a miracle, the bird’s swift arrival; but as Dick swept the brassy sky with a quick glance, he saw dot after dot in the distance, and in a trice the air seemed filled with these scavengers of the desert.

The fall of the big bullock proved to be the beginning of the end. Actually not a single beast crossed the bad strip of country and gained the ridge. Weakened by long fasting, they stumbled on the broken, rocky ground, and fell, one after the other, and to fall was fatal; the poor brute that dropped had not the strength to rise again.

Mr Barry rode at the heels of the fast-thinning mob like a man in a dream. He scarcely glanced aside at each victim

of the terrible drought as it fell, only pressed steadily on the remainder until, with easier travelling in plain sight, the last bullock dropped, and then he drew rein and turned his horse and looked down the long slope dotted with the bodies of his last mob of bullocks.

Dick and Jerry drew rein also, and for a few moments there was perfect silence in face of this last crushing blow dealt by the cruel, relentless drought. At last Jerry spoke.

‘My word, Mr Barry,’ he said huskily, ‘if I ain’t just about sorry! It’s cruel, hard luck.’

Mr Barry smiled, a wry, twisted smile. ‘Well, Jerry,’ he said slowly, ‘this is the third time I’ve been bust with the drought in the “Never-Never,” so I ought to be getting used to it. Seems to me I shall have to try pick and shovel again. I don’t seem to see anything else for it.’

‘I’ll come with you, father,’ said Dick.

Mr Barry looked at his son and shook his head. ‘It’s a rough life, lad,’ he said; ‘and somebody must stay at Ballamoola to look after your mother. Well, that’s a matter to talk of another day;’ and he dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. ‘What’s to be done now? That’s the question. Suppose you lads ride on to Narana and tell Billy Weir he needn’t expect the bullocks. If you’ll do that, I’ll go home again.’

The boys agreed at once, and the little party separated. Dick and Jerry pressed forward across the ridge and over the plain beyond to Narana, while Mr Barry picked his way back down the slope littered with his fallen cattle.

‘Ain’t it frightful luck?’ said Jerry as the boys rode on.

Dick nodded. His heart was too full to speak. He knew how proud his father had been of the fine herd of stock which had been worked up on Ballamoola, and to see the big, splendid beasts fade away to mere skeletons, and then lie down and pant their lives away from sheer famine, was simply heart-rending.

'What gits me,' went on Jerry, 'is some folk's luck. Now there's Mr Carew; it wouldn't matter a flick o' a wallaby's tail to him if all Narana were bust right up, an' he's all right. Got water runnin' as steady as can be, an' grass growin' like anythin'. But cheer up, Dick, old chap; Ballamoola ain't done up yet. The grass will pop up wi' the next rain, an' yer dad 'ull stock it again, I know. He's a bad un to beat.'

'Yes; he generally comes out top-side,' replied Dick.

'There was an old chap, an old swaggy, turned up at our place the other day, sundown o' course,' said Jerry; 'an' he was talkin' about gold bein' struck up beyond Bunya River somewheres. P'raps yer dad 'ull strike for that, an' bring a hatful back.'

'He'll get it if there's any to be had,' said Dick; 'he's up to every move in that game.'

'So I've heard many a time,' returned Jerry. 'The old swaggy said it was a dead-sure thing up there.'

When they arrived at Narana the first person they saw was Billy Weir himself. The good-natured stockman was very sorry to hear of the Barrys' bad luck, and shook his head as he looked up at the sky, in which the sun blazed like a furnace.

'Cruel weather,' said Billy; 'never seed crueller in my life. Cattle droppin' everywhere except along our water-hole, an' no sign o' rain. Well, there, it can't be helped. Nought to be done save grin an' bear it.' Then something came into his mind, and he turned to it eagerly to change the gloomy subject. 'Now I come to think o' it, Dick,' he said, 'the mail came in here yesterday, an', by gum! there's a tidy-sized parcel for you. I was thinkin' this mornin' I mustn't forget it if ye came over wi' the bullocks.'

'A parcel for me, Billy?' said Dick. 'Who could have sent it?'

'S'pose we go in and see,' said the stockman, leading the

way to the big store-shed. 'It's got your name on it outside all right an' good, an' I reckon it's Arthur's hand o' write, if I ain't a lot out in my reck'nin'.'

The parcel was fetched out and opened, and to the boys' great surprise and pleasure it contained three Scouts' outfits, which Arthur had sent up-country to his friends of the Lone Patrol. Dick and Jerry were immensely pleased with this timely present, and read over and over again the note which Arthur had enclosed. He said that his father had given the rig-out in acknowledgment of the boys' excellent service at the branding muster, and that he had carefully chosen everything that the Kangaroos could require.

'An' he's remembered Jacky as well;' and Jerry chuckled as he fingered one thing after another, and threw down his old cabbage-tree to try on a Scout's broad-brimmed hat. 'I say, Dick, we'll be real bang-up Boy Scouts now. This is great.'

'Rather,' returned Dick; 'we couldn't have got hold of anything more to our fancy.' And it was a very pleased pair of Scouts who rode back to Ballamoola, with the outfits divided into two parcels and dangling at their saddle-D's.

'Too late to go home to-night, Jerry,' said Dick as they came in sight of the station. 'You'll have to stop with us again.'

'Don't care if I don't go home for a week,' replied Jerry. 'There's nothin' much to do at our place.'

'Come on,' said Dick; 'I can smell the supper, and I'm as hungry as a dingo.'

When the boys went into the big, slab-walled room, where Mrs Barry was setting out the supper, Dick looked round.

'Where's father?' he asked.

'Gone to Jim M'Lean's,' replied Mrs Barry. 'The poor man can't rest, so he's gone to talk things over with Jim.'

Dick nodded and understood. Jim M'Lean was an old

mate of Mr Barry's, and it was when prospecting with Jim that Dick's father had made the lucky stroke which enabled him to set up at Ballamoola. Now M'Lean, too, had settled down on a station some thirty-five miles away; but the drought was hitting him as savagely as his old companion, and Dick felt certain he would be easily persuaded to go once more in search of gold.

'He went off almost at once,' said Mrs Barry. 'I wanted him to wait till to-morrow, but he said he couldn't sit still for a minute.'

'H'm!' remarked Dick as he attacked the broiled mutton; 'we sha'n't see him for a day or two. He'll have a big yabber [talk] with Jim.'

'I expect so,' said Mrs Barry, and sighed as she thought of the last stroke which the pitiless drought had dealt them that day.

The next morning Mrs Barry and the boys were sitting at breakfast, when they heard through the open window the rattle of wheels, a rare sound at Ballamoola. They were looking at each other in surprise, when the door was opened and in came Billy Weir.

'Good-mornin', Mrs Barry,' said the stockman. 'I've just put a couple o' horses in the buggy and run over here to ask you to come an' see my wife. She's been took uncommon queer—bad touch o' fever, I'm afraid—and I thought p'raps you wouldn't mind givin' her a look.'

'Come, Billy? I'll come at once,' cried Mrs Barry. 'Here, sit down and have a bit of breakfast while I get ready.'

By the time Billy had eaten a mutton-chop and a wedge of damper and drunk a quart of tea Mrs Barry was ready, and away they went full speed, Billy driving the buggy with marvellous skill over the rough and broken track.

The two boys ran to the top of a little rise behind the house and watched the buggy buck and jump until it disappeared in the scrub, then turned away.

‘Let’s get out our Scout-rig and go for a scout round,’ suggested Jerry. ‘It’s about all we can do. There ain’t any Scout’s job to be picked up about here as far as I can see.’

But Dick made no reply. He had run his eye, as a bushman or a black-fellow is always doing, over the country, and had seen something.

‘What’s that trotting slowly along across there?’ he said, pointing. ‘See, it’s just passed that big gum-tree.’

Jerry shaded his eyes and looked. ‘It’s a dingo slinkin’ along,’ he said.

But at the next moment Dick let out a yell. ‘That it never is!’ he cried. ‘It’s old Snip. I know the way he carries himself. He’s coming back without Jacky. That’s queer. There’s something wrong.’

Without another word the boys ran at full speed to meet the dog. They drew nearer and saw that Snip it was, but moving slowly and stiffly.

As Dick bounded up to him the dog gave a little yelp of joy; he wagged his tail and lay down on the sand. He was utterly worn-out and exhausted.

‘Look here!’ cried Dick; ‘he’s brought a message. This is a scrap of Jacky’s shirt tied round his neck, and there’s a bit of paper fastened in it.’

In a second Dick had whipped out his knife and cut away the wisp of cloth tied round Snip’s neck. Then he unrolled the paper and read aloud: ‘Up Bunya River—Gully with black stone—Come’——

There was not another word on the paper; but a dull streak of blood crossed it from corner to corner.

The boys eyed each other in wonder, and then Dick looked at the paper again. ‘It’s a sheet out of Blake’s note-book,’ said Dick. ‘Jerry, they’re in a fix, and they’ve sent old Snip to ask for help. See, the first writing is plain enough; but the word “Come” is all shaky, and it

stops, as if Blake couldn't write any more. Then there's this dab of blood all across the paper.'

'An' look at Snip,' cried Jerry; 'he's been cut about a bit!'

Snip had stretched himself out and lay panting. A dark stain showed on his brindled side, and Dick parted the hair and discovered a deep cut behind his shoulder. He whistled. He knew very well what had caused the injury.

'This is a spear-cut, Jerry!' he cried. 'Snip's had a spear flung at him! They're bailed up! Blake and Jacky are bailed up by warrigals [wild blacks]! We must help them!'

'My word,' said Jerry, 'so they are! An' whose blood is that on the paper? Not Snip's. The paper was folded over it.'

No; it was not Snip's blood which stained that broken but most eloquent message. What had happened to Sergeant Blake and Jacky? For a moment the boys stared at each other in wonder and horror.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WARRIGALS' WELL.

BUT Dick was prompt to act. He stooped down, picked up the wounded dog, and hurried towards the station with the poor beast in his arms.

'Seems to me your Scout's job has turned up in short order, Jerry,' he said as he hastened along. 'I rather fancy we've got to look into this.'

'Sure enough,' replied Jerry briefly; and not another word was said until they gained the men's huts. Here they found Tarbox lying in his bunk, with the two black-fellows whom Mr Barry employed chatting to him.

Dick carefully laid Snip on a bundle of empty sacks, and sent Jemmie, one of the black-fellows, to fetch some water. When the water was brought Snip lapped madly, for he had travelled far and fast and had lost blood from his wound. Food was offered him, but he did not eat. He drank until he had lapped his fill, then curled himself up and went to sleep.

'What do you think of this, Tarbox?' asked Dick when he had told of Snip's arrival and shown the blood-stained paper.

'Mine think it warrigals got Marmie and Jacky. Kill um p'raps.'

'Marmie' is the term a black trooper always employs for his commanding-officer.

'No,' said Dick; 'they're not killed or they couldn't have sent the message. But they're in a jolly fix, I fancy.'

'Mine think it bail up, only dog run away,' said the trooper.

'Mine think it too,' replied Dick, falling into the native talk. 'You get up and come with me, Tarbox.'

The trooper tried to rise from the bunk, but fell back from sheer weakness. It was not from want of will, for his dark eyes glittered like sparks at the prospect of a brush with his wild fellow-blacks.

'Tarbox ain't on this time,' said Jerry. 'What's to be done, boss?' for Jerry always remembered that he was No. 2 in the Lone Patrol.

Dick was silent for a moment and scratched his jaw. Then he spoke. 'We'll have to tackle it ourselves, Jerry. There's Narana and there's M'Lean's to get help. But both are a long way in the wrong direction, and while we're riding all those miles we could cover best part of the track to Bunya River. And if the Sergeant and Jacky don't get a hand quick it might easily be all over with 'em.'

'Right you are,' said Jerry calmly. 'Then the Lone Patrol gits a start on 'em as soon as they can.'

'That's it,' said Dick; and the boys turned to at once. With the aid of the two black-fellows belonging to Ballamoola they were ready to start within an hour. Dick had no intention of taking these two blacks with him. Capital station-hands were Jemmie and Pintpot, but no use in a scrimmage; so he left to them the care of the sick man and of Ballamoola.

Dick fetched down from a beam the police carbine he had captured when the wild blacks were stampeded, and Tarbox lent his to Jerry. The trooper had twenty-four rounds of ammunition in his case, and the boys divided the stock, a dozen cartridges each, and were ready to go.

Away they trotted to the north-west, towards the distant ridges where the Bunya River plunged through gullies in times of rain, and whither their friends had been drawn to fall into some hidden danger. The Lone Patrol might be few in numbers, but it made no small figure as it rode away

from Ballamoola amid the shrill cries of Jemmie and Pintpot, wishing it good fortune and success. Dick and Jerry were clad in their new uniforms, each with carbine slung across his shoulders, and well-packed swag swinging at saddle-bow. Dick, of course, rode Whitesock, and Jerry was mounted on a chunky little cob, very fast and steady, a real little nugget of a horse, which he called Dandy. As they trotted easily over the sandy flat Jerry chuckled and patted Dandy's neck.

'Well, if it ain't luck that I came over here on old Dandy!' he said. 'I'd a mind to bring Nobbler. He's a good un, but for a journey like this Dandy's a long way the best horse we've got. We can laugh at the warrigals as long as we stick in the saddles o' these two.'

'We can,' said Dick, 'and as long as we take care we're not ambushed. Blake and Jacky were riding good horses too. I wonder how they came to let the blacks get within range.'

'I've heard more'n once that Blake was too careless about niggers,' said Jerry.

'So have I,' rejoined Dick; 'but then, Jacky was with him. And Jacky would smell a warrigal a mile away. Blake would get plenty of warning that blacks were in the neighbourhood.'

Jerry shook his head. It was impossible for any one to say how the Sergeant had been attacked; but attacked he had been, and badly wounded too, as witnessed by the stains of blood on the paper and the uncompleted message.

The sandy flat ended in broken country, over which the horses were allowed to pick their way at a quiet walk. Then the Boy Scouts came to a vast-spreading plain, which reached right away to the horizon and seemed of boundless extent. Now reins were tightened and the two horses put to a steady hand-gallop, a pace to which they were thoroughly accustomed, and the swift, graceful Whitesock and the sturdy

Dandy began to throw the miles behind in the steady, tireless fashion of which the Australian Out-Back nag has the secret.

Hour after hour they rode on, Dick setting the course by the sun, until he suddenly drew rein.

'Hello!' said Jerry, and pulled up too.

Dick trotted back a few yards and pointed. Jerry followed, looked, nodded. Now it had been pointed out, he saw it as well as any one, for Jerry was not half a bad tracker; but he lacked Dick's all-seeing eye.

And what was it that Dick was pointing at? Nine people out of ten would have declared there was nothing whatever to be seen on the patch of hard, sandy soil. The tenth would have looked closer, and said there were a few scratches and one or two marks in the softer places, but who or what had made them it was impossible to say. But to the young bushmen of the Lone Patrol the marks and scratches were like a page of print. They sat for a moment scanning them; then Dick sprang down to read them more closely. They knew that it was a warrigals' path they had crossed, a path used recently by the wild blacks; and in a moment Jerry said, 'How many, Dick?'

'Any number up to a dozen,' replied the patrol-leader, running the trail a few yards and carefully picking up every detail.

'How old?' asked the other, referring to the age of the tracks.

'This morning,' returned Dick, 'and all men, too; there isn't a single track left by a woman, child, or dog.'

Jerry whistled. That looked ugly. When the wild blacks move without the usual crowd of gins, piccaninnies, and half-wild dogs, it means that the latter are hidden away in some secret gully, and that the warriors are out for blood.

Dick straightened himself and looked thoughtfully ahead for a moment. 'Look here, Jerry,' he said, 'this track goes

roughly our way. We'd better follow it up a bit and see where these warrigals are and what they're doing.'

Jerry nodded, and Dick sprang into the saddle. Then they moved at an easy trot along the trail. Within a mile, to their surprise, the trail ran into a fairly marked path, and the two boys glanced at each other.

'Hello!' said Jerry; 'there's a warrigals' well somewhere ahead, I'll lay a trifle.'

'Right you are, Jerry,' replied Dick. 'We must go carefully or we may blunder right on top of them in camp.'

They had been crossing for some time a stretch of country which appeared completely burnt up and waterless. Yet amid the most arid desert of the 'Never-Never' country there are sometimes to be found spots where water can be obtained. Many of these spots are utterly unknown to the stockmen or prospectors who are at times compelled to cross these dreadful wastes; but every one is well known to the wild blacks, and the latter conceal their knowledge most carefully. Not only will they refuse to point them out to whites with whom they may become friendly, but they will always approach these hidden springs by some secret and solitary path, a path far remote from any road and only to be hit upon by sheer accident. Thus these tiny water-holes are known as warrigals' wells, wild blacks' wells.

Dick and Jerry moved most cautiously along the track, for it wound here and there through patches of mulga scrub, where they might easily have been ambushed by the warrigals had their approach once been discovered. Dick was taking no chances. Sergeant Blake, a very hot-headed, impetuous man, might be careless about niggers, but the leader of the Lone Patrol wasn't. He knew them too well. The wild blacks of the Bunya River country were not only fierce and blood-thirsty, but big powerful fellows, who threw spear and boomerang in splendid fashion; and Dick knew

well that a man who received a native spear in his ribs would get all he wanted and a trifle over.

So, like true scouts, the Kangaroos went ahead coolly, quietly, and steadily, until Jerry said softly, 'Here we are ;' and they drew rein beside a warrigals' well. It was a deep hole under a big rock, and the mouth of the hole was carefully closed by a large, flat stone. This had been done in order that dingoes and wild beasts should not drink or make filthy the precious store of liquid which lay beneath.

The boys looked carefully on every hand before they dismounted ; but there was no cover for a good distance round the well, and all seemed safe and quiet. Down sprang Dick, and Jerry took Whitesock's rein. Dick bent over the stone, worked his fingers under its edges, then swung it away with a grunt of satisfaction.

'Plenty of water here,' he said ; 'that's good.'

He knelt down and looked more closely into the well. His first glance told him that the warrigals had been drinking from it recently, for the water-mark was lowered. The rocky sides of the hole were wet for a good five inches above the level of the water, and the well was slowly refilling as the water oozed in gently from the hidden spring which was its source.

Almost at the same moment Jerry found another trace of the recent presence of the aboriginals.

'Look here,' said Jerry. 'Blacks' fire ; not long out either.'

A dozen paces beyond the well, under cover of a small boulder, were the ashes of the fire at which the blacks camped while they took a meal. A glance at the fire told the trained eyes of the Kangaroos that no white man had sat round it. It was a dirty fire. The white man cooks his meat decently and leaves no mess. Here the half-burnt brands were spattered with grease and stained with blood, and fragments of entrails and refuse lay all around, showing

that the blacks had torn their game to pieces, thrown the flesh on the embers till it was warmed through, and then devoured it half-raw.

Dick followed the track a score of yards beyond the fire, then came back.

'They finished their tucker, then pegged straight ahead,' said the patrol-leader. 'They're moving pretty lively, too. It certainly isn't a hunting-party. They're driving along as if they'd got an engagement somewhere. Well, Jerry, this well will save our water.'

'Right you are,' said Jerry, and came down and unstrapped a big billy from his saddle. He filled this and watered Whitesock and Dandy, while Dick cut some mulga-boughs for them—poor enough fodder, but there was nothing else to be had.

Then the boys tucked in some damper and cold beef, and washed down their food with moderate draughts from the well, and then made ready for a fresh start.

'I say, Jerry,' said Dick when they had gone a couple of miles or more from the well, 'this mob of warrigals is heading pretty straight for the Bunya River.'

'Just what I was thinkin',' returned No. 2. 'You might ha' had the notion out o' my head. "Goin' our way, these fellows," says I to myself not a minute back.'

Dick was a bit puzzled, and shook his head. He did not like the look of things. Why were the warrigals trooping up to the Bunya River? He would rather have seen them striking in any other direction. His bush instinct, that sixth sense of a bushman, warned him that something was wrong; that some sinister meaning lay under this swift, steady march of a wandering band to the point where danger threatened their friends.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SIGNAL-FIRE.

BUT Dick was not puzzled for long. Ten minutes later the two riders cautiously picked their way up an easy slope, from the top of which Dick promised his companion they would be able to see right across to the Bunya River country.

They gained the low ridge under cover of a huge, fallen gum-tree, which had pitched straight over in some wild storm, and looked ahead. As he did so Dick whistled softly, and Jerry murmured his unfailing 'Hello!' and they looked at each other.

What did they see? Nothing much; yet it meant a great deal to them. For far ahead, in the still, hot air of the burning afternoon, a thin column of smoke was rising high into the sky. Now they understood the haste of the wild blacks. That column of smoke was a native signal, calling scattered parties of the tribe to a rallying-spot. Such a signal can be made out by a warrigal from an immense distance, and without doubt the band of warriors upon whose tracks the boys had been marching were obeying the call.

'Seems to me,' murmured Jerry, 'that the niggers are all hookin' it as fast as they can pelt up to the Bunya.'

'That's a fact, Jerry,' said Dick, biting his lips in thought. 'It's a corroboree-fire. We've got to move up there pretty careful, I can tell you.'

Jerry nodded. He knew that at the foot of yonder far-off pillar piles of dried grass had been fired in a great circle, and the smoke from the various fires, drawing together, had

ascended far into the sky, announcing that a corroboree, a great festal dance of the tribe, was to be held.

‘They’re goin’ to have a high old time up there,’ said Jerry. ‘They’ve got hold o’ somethin’ for a big feast. I wonder’—— He stopped, and the two boys looked at each other, and Dick drew in his breath sharply. The horrible thought had struck him too. The tribe along the Bunya River were said to be cannibals, and it was possible that the prospector or the Sergeant or Jacky had fallen into their hands. The pillar of smoke was not only a signal, but also to them a fearful warning.

‘Go back,’ it said, ‘and you ride towards safety. Come on, and you enter a region of frightful danger, where cunning and wary foes may be hidden behind every bush, every rock, where you may be pierced by a spear flung by an unseen hand, or stunned by a club or boomerang hurled with unerring aim.’

Dick and Jerry were no new chums. They knew all this, though neither put it into words; but not for a second did any thought of turning back enter into their minds. Both as Boy Scouts and as young bushmen they were driven forward to do what they could in aid of those whom they knew to be in deadly peril somewhere in that distant range of low hills, and as they talked together in quiet tones there was not the faintest hint on either side of retreat; they only discussed the best way of approaching the Bunya unperceived.

‘There’s one thing pretty plain,’ remarked Jerry; ‘we ain’t got to scoot up an’ down the Bunya lookin’ for a creek wi’ a black stone, whatever the Sergeant might mean by that. For where the niggers an’ that fire are, I’ll bet our people ain’t far away.’

‘Right, Jerry,’ said Dick. ‘I’m with you there. Well, I reckon we’d better drop the straight line up to that fire, and ride right round and come on ’em from the other way.

They'll never be looking for anybody from the north, and we can get close in.'

'All right,' said Jerry; 'seems to me a good plan. How far do you make it to that smoke?'

'About fifteen miles,' replied Dick. 'And we'll have to move a bit to get well the other side of it before dark.'

Nearly three hours later the two Scouts drew rein on the bank of a long, narrow lagoon. They had reached the Bunya River, and found that there was plenty of water in this part of it. There was no stream, of course; that was not to be expected at this season. But a series of lagoons and water-holes was stretched along the bed, each divided from the other by a sweep of white, glittering sand.

'Well,' murmured Jerry, 'here we are on the Bunya an' well north o' the smoke. What do you reckon the little nags ha' done to-day, Dick? Seventy mile?'

'Every inch of it,' replied Dick, patting the sweat-stained neck of Whitesock. 'Thank goodness, there's plenty of good grass and water for them here!'

'Yes,' said Jerry; 'they'll be able to get a tightener here.'

At the lower end of the lagoon where they had halted, the water had dried recently from a wide patch of the bed, and this patch was covered with water couch-grass, while a little river-flat was knee-deep in rich natural pasture.

Both boys sat still in the saddle and looked keenly round. They were in a savage and hostile country, and they knew their danger. The smallest mistake might exact a terrible penalty. They had now to be very cautious, not only for their friends' sake, but for their own as well.

'Looks quiet enough,' murmured Dick, and Jerry nodded. It certainly looked as if no warrigals were in the neighbourhood of this lagoon. A more lovely scene of calm, smiling even could not be imagined. The sun, now setting fast, made the lagoon shine like a sheet of gold, its smooth surface broken only by the rise of a leaping fish or the move-

ment of flocks of black-and-white pelican and wild-fowl of various kinds, many with gorgeous plumage. In the shallows were lovely water-lilies with great pink and purple blossoms, and along the fringe of the lagoon were groves of stately reeds. But amid that quiet beauty there might be great danger hidden, and the Scouts were not taking any chances.

‘Jerry,’ said Dick, ‘you stay here and keep your eye open while I ride round the pool.’

Jerry nodded, unslung his carbine, which was ready loaded, and sat motionless, finger on trigger, while Dick cantered steadily round the pool. But not a track was to be seen; not a movement was made among the bushes.

‘All quiet,’ said Dick as he returned; and both Scouts breathed a sigh of relief, for they were longing to give their gallant mounts a rest and a feed.

They made their camp under a flowering acacia, and when they had watered and hobbled the horses, they lay down at full length to rest their weary bones and munch some food. No fire was built lest the attention of the wild blacks should be attracted, and instead of the tea, which would have been so refreshing after their long, exhausting ride, they drank the tepid water of the lagoon.

They heaved another sigh of relief when the sun went down and the swift darkness wrapped the earth. Now they were free to move whither they would, for the night, so great a time of danger when dealing with many foes, is a time of safety in which to search for the warrigal. The wild black has so great a fear of the powers of darkness that he never strays from the protection and comfort of his camp-fire when once night has fallen.

The night was about two hours old when a faint, far-off sound came to the ears of the Scouts. It was like a distant muffled roll of drums, and it grew and grew until you might have thought that a regiment was on the march in the distance.

'They've begun,' said Jerry; and the two boys sprang to their feet. It was the sound for which they had been waiting—the sound which was a signal for them to set out on a perilous quest in search of their missing friends. It marked the beginning of the great corroboree now in progress.

There was no moon, but the starlight was ample for the keen-eyed Scouts. Working by its faint, silver radiance, they marched along the river-bank, picking their way carefully through the clumps of scrub which fringed the course of the stream. They went a couple of miles, and then Dick whispered, 'Look ahead, Jerry; look ahead.'

'Ay, ay,' said Jerry, 'they've got a No. 1 fire; that means a big affair.'

The boys had cleared a clump of tall gidyahs, and now saw a bright glare in the sky not a great distance before them, and the sound, like a roll of drums, grew louder and louder, and now there burst out a tremendous volume of yells and outcries.

Upon hearing this outburst of wild screeching the two Scouts pushed ahead faster still. The corroboree was in full swing; now was the moment to approach and see what the warrigals were doing.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CORROBOREE.

TWENTY minutes later the boys were crawling, as flat as snakes, to the head of a little bluff overlooking a tiny river-flat in a bend of the stream. Foot by foot they moved forward until they had gained the edge of the bluff. Here a few tufts of wattles were growing, and through these they peered down on the flat below. It was a wild and striking scene which lay before them.

In the centre of the flat an enormous bonfire was burning, the broad blaze leaping high and lighting the place like noonday. Around the fire whirled what seemed a veritable dance of death, for it seemed as if a ring of grisly skeletons leapt round and round in the flashing light. Yet skeletons they were not, for when the dancers came between the boys and the fire it could be seen that their bodies were solid enough. These dancers were the warriors of the tribe, and the frightful skeleton-like effect was gained by painting the ribs and bones of the body and limbs with stripes of white paint. The method was simple, but in the firelight it was horribly effective. And as the warriors whirled madly round the huge flaring pile, shaking their spears and tomahawks, and clashing wildly together their nulla-nullas (heavy clubs), or beating with boomerangs on their heilamans (shields of hard wood), while a loud rhythmical chant and a steady beating of drums kept time to the fierce dance, the uproar was tremendous, and a feeling of great excitement spread through the air and profoundly affected the two Scouts watching this strange scene.

The drumming noise was produced by the gins (women) and lubras (girls). Gins and lubras were seated in a great circle

around the dancers, and before each was placed a folded rug of opossum-skin. These rugs serve as garments by day and couches by night, and when folded tight and beaten by the closed fist or hardened sticks at corroborees they give the effect of a roll of muffled drums.

Dick and Jerry had seen a corroboree before, but never among quite so wild and savage a tribe as these Bunya River blacks, and this was the fiercest and most furious they had ever witnessed.

‘My word, Dick!’ breathed Jerry into his leader’s ears, ‘these are about the stiffest lot to tackle I’ve seen in my time. I reckon they’re about as wild as they make ’em.’

Dick nodded, then jerked his companion, and whispered, ‘Hallo; look there!’

Jerry looked, and blew out a soft ‘Whew!’ of surprise. The warriors were falling back a little as they danced, and into the open space bounded a tall figure. Dick knew the savage at once; it was the half-caste.

‘My Colonial, Jerry!’ whispered Dick; ‘why, that’s the half-caste I bagged this carbine from. These are the black-fellows who nobbled the Narana bullocks.’

‘Must be,’ whispered Jerry in return. ‘Look! he’s the chief dancer to-night.’

The half-caste had bounded into the circle, covered with a great skin-cloak. Suddenly he cast it aside and leapt high from the ground. He was now stripped bare save for a loin-cloth, just as a black-fellow goes to battle. His body and limbs were painted with stripes of white and red, white and red rings were drawn round eyes and mouth, and his hair was bound with a fillet of bright water-reeds, which gleamed ruddy against the black locks. Plumes of splendid feathers were bound in the fillet, and danced and nodded above his head as he leapt to and fro. These plumes were signs of rank, and denoted that he was a great chief of the tribe.

Thrice he leapt round the fire, while the rhythmic chant



‘Hullo! look there.’

grew louder and the drumming music swelled and swelled; then a rude effigy was dragged forward and laid on the ground. At sight of this the half-caste paused and stood staring, and then followed a piece of wonderful pantomime. Step by step, very, very slowly, he crept towards the rude figure, and as he slowly, softly moved towards it the chant became low and the drumming fell to a soft, gentle measure. Inch by inch the performer advanced, giving a marvellous effect of a cautious, cunning approach to a sleeping figure. Then, when within springing distance, he showed his agility in a tremendous leap, and as he sprang he brought his nulla-nulla down on the head of the figure and drove his long fighting-spear into its body; and as he did so the whole assembly burst into a terrific yell of triumph and the drumming swelled to its loudest note, and as the principal performer continued to strike and stab the effigy the uproar was tremendous.

The Boy Scouts understood this pantomime perfectly. 'That's how he settled somebody,' whispered Jerry. Dick nodded. Yes, that was certainly how the half-caste had settled somebody; but who was the somebody? Dick's heart was heavy for his friends. Did this pantomime furnish a clue to the full meaning of the blood-stained message and the spear-wounded dog?

Suddenly the boys sharpened their ears and listened intently. The gins and lubras began to sing in chorus. They used a few native words, and chanted them over and over again, drumming steadily in time to the chant. The boys understood the native speech, and both started as they caught the words.

'Bring out the white man! Let us see the white man!' was the chant; and again, 'Bring out the white man! Let us see the white man!'

'Dick—Dick,' whispered Jerry, 'they've got hold o' one o' 'em! They've got a prisoner!'

'Sounds like it,' replied Dick. 'My Colonial, Jerry! we've got to do something. As sure as they've bagged a man, they'll kill him before the corroboree's over.'

'That they will,' whispered Jerry excitedly. 'We must let fly into 'em, an' try to cut in an' get him away while they're all rattled wi' the shootin'.'

The boys threw forward their carbines, and waited eagerly for a sight of the prisoner. Over and over again the appeal rang out, and it was addressed to the half-caste, who was now leaping furiously about the fire, and affected not to hear the song of the women. Louder and louder it grew, and at last he stopped and made gestures of refusal. All this was in the play, and now the women increased their vehemence and screamed at the full pitch of their voices, 'Bring out the white man! Let us see the white man!'

Suddenly they ended their chant in a shrill note of delight. The half-caste had gone. With a huge, flying leap he bounded through the circle of warriors; a few strides and a second great leap carried him over the heads of the seated spectators, and he vanished into the gloom behind.

The warriors began a fresh dance and the women broke into a song of praise for the victor; but the Boy Scouts had neither eyes nor ears for them. They watched, with fast-beating hearts, the point where the half-caste had disappeared, and strained their eyes into the gloom beyond the arch of firelight, eager to catch the first glimpse of the white man whom the warrigals had seized.

Three minutes of dreadful anticipation dragged slowly by; then with a shock of surprise the boys saw the half-caste leap once more into the ring. As he did so the song of praise grew louder; but to the great relief of the watchers the half-caste came alone.

'Whew!' Jerry blew out an immense sigh of satisfaction. 'Well,' he said, 'if they didn't just about have me that time!

It's only one o' their corroboree games after all. There ain't no prisoner. My word! that's great.'

Dick made no reply. He could not understand the feeling which possessed him. He felt relieved, it is true, and yet he felt horribly uneasy as well. Did it all mean nothing? He was not sure, and he waited and watched as eagerly as ever.

'See!' whispered Jerry; 'he's holdin' somethin' behind his back. It'll be somethin' made up to look like a white man. Only a corroboree game after all!' And again he sighed his relief.

Still Dick waited and watched. What was it, after all, which the half-caste had to display? The big fellow had now begun to dance madly once more, and the firelight, playing on his yellow body with its fantastic and grotesque stripes and rings of red and white paint, made him look like some horrible demon from the nether world. Suddenly five or six gins ran forward and cast huge armfuls of withered brushwood on the blazing pile. With a hiss, a crackle, and a roar the fire shot through the fresh fuel and a fiercer, wilder light still was thrown on the dancing figure. And now, with a yell which rang high above the cries of the shouting crowd, the half-caste whipped his hands from behind him and held high the object which he had been concealing.

'Merciful heavens!' gasped Jerry. 'Look, Dick; look!'

Dick was looking; but he made no reply to Jerry's wild whisper. For a moment the blood seemed frozen in his veins. He was looking at an awful trophy of the wild black's success. A spear was being held aloft, and on it was a head, a grim and ghastly head, that of a white man—he, without doubt, who had fallen to the club and spear of the half-caste, as shown in the pantomime which had gone before.

As the head was raised aloft the whole tribe burst into a tremendous cry of exultation, and spears were waved and

shields were struck and the drumming boomed out louder and louder. Then the warriors leapt out into a still wilder dance round the half-caste, who brandished the spear and bounded so madly into the air that the heavy black locks on the head of the slain man were tossed to and fro with a ghastly semblance of life.

This was the culmination of the festal rite. The whole mob gave themselves up to a mad orgy of shrieking and dancing, which the boys knew well would last until the blacks fell helpless from sheer exhaustion.

‘Dick—Dick,’ muttered Jerry, ‘this is frightful! Who is it? Is it the Sergeant? It looks like his big black moustache.’

‘Frightful enough, Jerry,’ whispered Dick in return. ‘But it isn’t Blake. There’s a general look of him, but the hair’s too long.’

‘Then it’s one o’ the prospectors,’ said Jerry.

‘What’s happened to the rest?’ muttered Dick; and Jerry shook his head. The two Scouts lay still for some time and watched the wild dance below, the dance which circled round that grim and gory head.

Now you might easily suppose that with such a striking scene below them, and aghast as they were at the frightful centre of it, the boys had eyes for nothing else. Not a bit of it. They knew the dangerous game they were playing much better than that. At intervals of a few moments one or other of them would raise his head and peer carefully on either side and behind, and listen, to catch, if possible, any sound other than those made by the performers in the corroboree.

Jerry had just raised his head for one of these scouting glances, when he dropped as if he had been shot, and gripped Dick’s arm with a convulsive clutch. Dick read danger in that fierce grip and turned his head quickly. Thus he was in time to see what Jerry had already seen.

Thirty yards away the bluff sank sharply into a little gully, along which the flames cast a ruddy light. Moving along the edge of the gully, and plainly to be seen against the firelit background, was a figure creeping like a snake and almost flat with the earth. At the next moment it disappeared into a clump of bushes; but both boys had seen it, and knew it for what it was, the figure of a naked black-fellow. The same thought shot into both minds at once. Their presence in some way had been suspected, and a tribal scout was in search of them. If so, it was hopeless to escape his vigilance, and at a stroke their position became one of frightful danger.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STORY OF JACKY.

DICK glanced the other way. The background there was one of impenetrable gloom, and it was very unlikely that they could be seen against it if they moved. It was madness to stay where they were in face of that oncreeping figure, and a tug at Jerry's sleeve warned him of his leader's intention to escape. Jerry gave an answering tug to show that he understood, and the two Scouts, moving with the utmost caution, drew back from the lip of the bluff and crawled away towards a clump of low-growing scrub which they had passed as they approached the warrigals' camp.

They gained the clump, and lay flat under the bushes and watched the spot they had left. The beams of the fire, striking upwards, filled the air beyond the bluff with light, and would enable them to catch the outline of any moving thing on the bluff. Again Jerry gripped his leader's arm. There was the figure crawling snake-like along the edge of the bluff. It paused at the very spot where they had been lying; then it made a turning movement and vanished.

The boys held their breaths and waited for the yell which would announce to the savages below that the presence of enemies had been discovered; but no yell came.

'He's on our track,' whispered Jerry. 'Let's slide out.' And the boys again began their stealthy retreat. They knew that the black had discovered by touch the place where they had been lying, and was now following them up by feeling their tracks. Why had he not shouted? It could only be that he wished to make certain before disturbing the corroboree, and the boys feared to hear at any instant

the shout of pursuit raised at their back. But on they went, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred yards, and all was silent. They gained the foot of the rise, and ran down a last steep bit of the bank into the dried river-bed. They turned to look, and the figure stood above, on the top of the bank; they could see it clearly against the starlit sky.

Jerry swung up his carbine to his shoulder. 'I'll drop him,' hoarsely whispered Jerry. 'In that row they'll never hear the shot; then we can get away.'

But Dick seized the raised barrel and pressed its muzzle down again. 'Hold hard, Jerry,' he said. 'His business doesn't look like mischief. He's followed us too quietly.' And then, to the utter astonishment of the Scouts, a calm, guttural voice came to them from the top of the bank. 'Mine thinkit Dick and Jerry,' said the pursuer.

'Jacky!' gasped Jerry. 'Why, it's Jacky, by all the powers, an' I was just goin' to let fly at him!'

'Good old Jacky,' said Dick, and breathed a long sigh of relief; 'just the party we want to see.' And never was blackboy more joyfully received by white companions than was Ballamoola Jacky by his young master and Jerry.

'Look here, Jacky,' said Dick quickly; 'how many of the white men have the black-fellows got hold of?'

'One white-fellow look for gold,' replied Jacky.

'Ah!' said Dick; 'just what I thought—one of the prospectors. Where's Sergeant Blake and the other man?'

'Hide up in warrigals' hole,' replied the blackboy. 'Jacky come out to look.'

'And a jolly good job you did come out, too, Jacky, my son,' said Dick. 'Now our way's pretty clear sailing.'

'It is that,' remarked Jerry in a tone of deep satisfaction; 'things were gettin' more'n a trifle mixed up an' awkward. Strike a line for the Sergeant, Jacky.'

'All right,' said the young tracker; 'but come very quiet

alonga me. Mine thinkit black-fellows watch warrigals' hole.'

Jacky struck straight across the river-bed, and the others moved softly along on either side of him. As they went Jacky told his story in whispers; and with what the boys learned afterwards it came to this. He had guided Blake to the Bunya River, and had picked up almost at once the track of the two prospectors. Following the track, they came to a gully from which a creek had flowed into the river in the wet season, and at the mouth of this gully was a great, dark boulder; this had caused the Sergeant to call the place Black Stone Gully. Just inside this gully they found the camp of the prospectors, and they discovered the poor fellows in a frightful fix. One was very ill with dysentery and far too weak to travel; they had no horses, and were moving about the country on foot, humping the bluey—that is, carrying their worldly goods wrapped in a blue blanket on their shoulders. They had no rations, and the last shot of their ammunition had been fired, for the blacks had tried to rush their camp not three hours before the Sergeant and Jacky appeared, and had only been beaten off with the expenditure of every revolver-cartridge they had left.

All might now have gone very well had it not been for Sergeant Blake's contempt for the blacks. He had come into the district quite recently, and had been promoted from a southern command where the natives were no more to be feared than sheep, and he laughed at the stories of the fierceness of these northern aborigines. Privately he thought the prospectors had made much ado about nothing and wasted their cartridges in pure fright. He and Jacky camped with the prospectors, and between the tucker-bags which Mrs Barry had filled and a nest of emu's eggs which Jacky found they had plenty of rations. Not a black showed his face in the neighbourhood, and the Sergeant

felt more and more certain that the prospectors had been much more easily alarmed than they cared to admit. The sick man seemed to be much better the next day, and the Sergeant resolved to try to get him to Ballamoola.

The invalid was placed on a horse, the swags were packed on Jacky's horse, and a start was made on foot. Blake planned to go back by easy stages, camping at night.

They were not a mile on their way when they came to a patch of scrub, but not thick scrub—broken clumps through which it was easy to make a way. Here Jacky smelt danger; one black seems to feel it in his bones when other blacks are about, and Jacky felt it now. And not only Jacky; Snip felt it too. The old dog was as keen on a warrigal as on a wallaby, and he growled fiercely and every hair on his back bristled, and he absolutely refused to enter the scrub. Jacky warned the Sergeant; but Blake, with his repeating-carbine laid in the hollow of his arm, felt himself a match for a whole tribe of blacks, and laughed and said, 'Let 'em all come.'

And in the very heart of the broken patch of scrub they came. No sight or sound of coming was given ere a shower of spears whizzed into the little band. Every man and beast was struck save Jacky and Snip. The black-boy and the dog, conscious of danger, were marching in the rear, and with the first hiss of the missiles Jacky slid under a turpentine-bush, and Snip crouched beside him.

From his hiding-place Jacky saw everything. The Sergeant received a spear in his shoulder, but tore it out at once, and whipped up his carbine and fired swiftly into a clump of wattles from which spears had been hurled. This drove a bunch of blacks out of cover, and he dropped two of them instantly as he poured a hail of bullets from his repeating-rifle.

The sick man was struck also, and his horse received a couple of spears in the ribs. The wounded animal, in his

pain, dashed aside and galloped through the scrub. For barely a score of yards the rider, enfeebled by sickness, was able to cling to the saddle; then he was flung off, and was killed as he lay helpless on the ground. The pack-horse was killed instantly, a spear being driven through its heart, and the second prospector was wounded in the arm.

The skirmish was a matter of seconds, for the Sergeant's rapid and deadly fire sent the blacks flying for their lives; but that single shower of spears had done terrible mischief. Their horses were gone, one man was dead, two were wounded, and the Sergeant bled so freely from his wounded shoulder that he felt very weak, and knew that to attempt to go on was hopeless.

So they struggled back to their camp beside the water-hole on Black Stone Creek, and there Jacky proposed that Blake should send a message to Ballamoola by Snip, for the dog had been trained to go home on command.

The Sergeant tore a leaf from his note-book, and had barely begun to write when he fainted from loss of blood; but Jacky knew that enough had been written to give the alarm, and sent Snip off. How the good old dog came by his wound no one could tell. He was sound when he left the creek, and a spear must have been flung at him on his way home. When Blake came round, the prospector showed them the way to a strong native fortress a little farther up the creek, a place which he and his mate had discovered by accident, and thither they betook themselves.

'Who killed the white man, Jacky?' asked Dick.

'Big fellow—flour-bag black-fellow,' replied Jacky. Now, in blacks' lingo, 'flour-bag' means white; so Dick knew that his follower was trying to give them the idea of a white black-fellow—that is to say, the half-caste—and Dick nodded.

'An' you couldn't bring the white man with you?' said Jerry.

'No, no,' replied Jacky. 'Him gone bong [dead], and all gone bong if we stop to fetch him. Warrigals make big corroboree last night. Make big feast. Jacky see um. Eat white man; eat yarraman [horse]. Make big corroboree again now. Mine thinkit fighting corroboree now.' Jacky meant that the wild dance they had just witnessed was one intended to work up the warriors to another assault on the white men.

Dick nodded. He thought so too, and saw trouble ahead if the wounded men could not be instantly rescued.

Under the guidance of the blackboy they now turned into Black Stone Creek and hurried swiftly up it. Soon they came to the foot of a steep slope, and Jacky began to bark like a dingo as they climbed it. This was the signal agreed upon between him and Blake lest the latter should fire upon the returning Scout. Up went Jacky and up went the boys, the black barking at steady intervals.

Suddenly a voice spoke from the darkness before them. 'Who comes there?' it said.

'Mine thinkit all right now, Sergeant,' replied Jacky. 'Mine bringit Dick and Jerry to see you.'

The boys heard Blake's cry of delight and surprise, and the next moment found themselves at the foot of a cliff, with a barked tree, shining faintly white in the gloom, slanting up before them.

'Warrigals' ladder,' said Jacky, and began to climb up. Dick and Jerry followed at once. It was a rude ladder, such as the natives use, formed of a barked tree with stumps of branches left on here and there in place of rungs. They went up twenty feet, and found themselves looking into a long, low cave. At the farther end was a dim light, and against the light, but near at hand, could be seen a burly form.

'Hallo, Sergeant!' said Dick. 'How's your shoulder?'

'Faith, Dick, me brave boy, I'm glad to see ye,' said

Blake. 'Niver mind me shoulder. I deserve that for falling into the niggers' trap so easy as I did. Who's with ye, an' can we git away?'

The boys came forward, and the Sergeant shook their hands and led them towards the glow at the bottom of the cave, while Jacky went on sentry.

'Yes,' said Dick as they went down the cave; 'seems to me the best thing is to light out and strike for home right away. We've left our horses up-stream a bit; but they can soon be fetched. Is the other chap fit to travel?'

'Holy saints!' said Blake, 'but he's in a quare state. Since he lost his mate he seems little short o' loony. I'm thinkin' they'd been mates a long time, and now this chap's left alone he'll go a "hatter," as sure as my name's Denis Blake.'

They turned an angle of rock and came in sight of a small fire built in a corner. Above this corner was a crack in the roof which formed a natural vent, for the smoke went into it as if into a chimney. Over the handful of smouldering sticks crouched the second prospector, a bent, gray-haired old fellow, ragged, unkempt, and dirty, with one arm hanging useless at his side. His eyes were filled with a dark, sombre gaze, and were fixed on the fire with unwinking steadiness. Blake spoke to him, but he made no answer, nor did he so much as glance at the newcomers or give any sign that he had observed their presence.

CHAPTER XXII.

NO ESCAPE.

FIVE minutes' talk settled their plans. Whitesock and Dandy were to be fetched at once down to the Black Stone, the wounded men were to be set on their backs, and the Lone Patrol—for now it was at its full numbers—would guard them and accompany them on foot. This talk was almost entirely between Dick and the Sergeant, for Jerry soon began to nod when he sat down by the fire. The long, punishing ride had made him weary, and he couldn't keep his eyes open.

'Lie down, Jerry,' said his patrol-leader, 'and have a nap for a bit. We'll wake you when you're wanted.'

Jerry needed no second invitation. He stretched himself along on the smooth, dry sand, and was asleep almost before his head was laid on the arm which he raised for a pillow.

'Jacky can fetch the horses, I s'pose,' said Blake.

'I'll go with him,' returned Dick. 'This is no time to take any risks.'

'But how about your sleep?' said the Sergeant. 'You must feel pretty well done up, for it's been thunderin' hot to-day, an' over that dry country, too.'

'Oh, I can peg along a bit again,' said Dick; 'and, besides, Jacky might have trouble. I've heard Jerry say that Dandy isn't over-fond of the smell of a black.'

'Plenty of horses are like that,' agreed the Sergeant. 'Well, you're a broth of a boy, Dick, and I'll niver forgit what you're doin' for me an' this poor, lost old swaggy here.' A 'swaggy' is a man who carries his pack, his swag, his worldly possessions, on his back as he tramps.

The old swaggy now suddenly turned and looked

towards them. 'Right, Joe,' he said in a hard voice, then turned back and relapsed into his former brooding condition.

'It's his dead mate he means,' whispered the Sergeant. 'This is Bill; t'other was Joe, an' that's all I know about 'em.'

Dick lost no more time, but started off at once with Jacky to secure the horses. Down the great log they went, and then the two Scouts, white and black, slipped across the creek to the opposite bank and away northwards, to strike the spot where Whitesock and Dandy had been left. Dick shaped the line, and hit it off so well that they came out beside the lagoon almost at the foot of the acacia-tree. Within forty yards the two horses were cropping greedily at the rich grass, and they were secured without difficulty. In a trice they were bridled and saddled, and the two Scouts were returning by way of the river-bank, for the country they had just crossed was too rough for horses to travel.

All went well until they were near the mouth of Black Stone Creek.

'Now, Jacky,' said Dick, 'I'll hold the horses while you go longa cobbra [go ahead] and see if the warrigals are about.'

Away went Jacky, and Dick awaited his return in some anxiety.

'My Colonial!' reflected Dick. 'It sounds all quiet over there in the corroboree quarter. I hope the warrigals haven't set a watch on the cave. If they have, we'll never get there with the horses without being seen, and if they find we're on the move we'll be in a cheerful mess.'

Ten minutes passed slowly by, and then a darker shadow floated without a sound to Dick's side. It was Jacky, who had come back as silently as a ghost.

'Mine thinkit warrigals on bank up creek,' reported Jacky.

Dick gave a very faint whistle of vexation. He knew Jacky, and had proved a thousand times that what the black-boy thought turned out to be right. What was to be done? One thing was certain. It was of no earthly use to stand here. If discovered, they would at once be assailed from many sides by unseen foes. He must rejoin his companions at all risks.

He looked ahead. The river-bed stretched away, a sheet of white glistening sand by day, and even now glimmering palely in the dusky night. So it ran until the junction with the creek was reached, and the bed of the Black Stone was level sand too.

'Up with you, Jacky,' said Dick. 'We'll go full-tilt for the cave. It's no good crawling and creeping any more. That way we might blunder on some warrigals in the dark, and get a spear into us before we knew any one was handy.'

Up sprang Jacky, and the two horses were put to full speed. Down the river-bed they scoured, their hoofs sinking with dull thuds into the sand and flinging it in clouds behind them. Dick was a little ahead, and he strained his eyes in seach of the great, dark boulder which marked the mouth of the creek. Ah! there it was, its dark bulk distinct even in this faint light against the white sand. Dick turned his hand and Whitesock flew past it with Dandy hard at his heels.

But as they passed there was a sudden hiss of a spear flying within a foot of his head, and then the hum of a boomerang as it hurtled by, and with these missiles came a yell pitched in two different notes, and Dick knew that two of their enemies had been lying in cover of the boulder to watch the creek.

'Are you hit, Jacky?' cried Dick, looking round.

'No; all righta,' replied the blackboy as they rode faster still up the creek.

'Lucky for us,' said the leader of the Lone Patrol; 'between

the darkness and the pace we are going, they missed their shot that time. But that's blued all chance of our pulling out to-night.'

On they went, and soon drew rein beside the log ladder.

'How goes it, Dick?' came a soft voice from above.

'No chance of a move before morning, Sergeant,' replied Dick. 'They'd got a watch at the mouth of the gully, and there's no other way for us to march, I fancy.'

'That there isn't,' said Blake with a click of disgust. 'It's real thick scrub up the gully—scrub a dingo could hardly travel through.'

'What about the nags?' said Dick. 'They can't come up this log, and those confounded warrigals might creep up and spear 'em here.'

'That's all right,' said Blake. 'There's a cave on the ground-floor not ten yards to your right. They'll be safe enough in there with Jacky to watch 'em. Come up an' we'll talk things over.'

'Yes, yes,' said Jacky. 'Plenty big hole for yarraman. All same stable. Mine bin look in plenty times. All safe.'

Dick gave the reins into the hands of the faithful Jacky, and climbed quickly up the log. He found Blake awaiting him, and they sat down to discuss affairs.

'No chance of a night-march now,' groaned Blake.

'Not a bit of it,' replied Dick; 'they're on the lookout, and would be round us in no time. And then the moon's up in about an hour again. If we'd all got horses we could make a rush for it; but with some of us on foot, they'd just dodge round us and plug in a spear wherever they fancied. But look here, Sergeant,' went on Dick; 'these are a rum lot of blacks. It ain't at all in their regular style to keep a watch on us and be tinkering about at night.'

'No; it's that desarter, bad scran to the spalpeen!' growled Blake. 'If iver I git him within range o' my gun I'll score his hide for him.'

'Deserter?' said Dick in a puzzled tone. 'A deserter among warrigals? What sort of a deserter?'

'Why, a deserter from the Mounted Police,' said Blake. 'That big, yellow buck nigger; he cut an' run from Burnt Hollow station, an' took a carbine an' thirty rounds wid him.'

A flood of light burst upon Dick's mind. This explained everything. The half-caste was a trooper who had served in the force, knew the ways of the whites, had learned drill, and grasped the knowledge of a thousand things which were utter mysteries to the rest of his tribe. This was why the captured carbine was in excellent order. Dick laughed, and told his story and exhibited the carbine which had been carried off from Burnt Hollow, and which he had retaken in so odd a fashion.

'I see, I see,' said Blake; 'ye've run across the yellow baste before. Well, well, it's a good thing he's lost his gun. He's the sort to do mischief wid it.'

He was, indeed, the sort to do mischief. The fiercest, the most blood-thirsty warrigal is little to be feared in comparison with one who has served under the white man, who has greatly lost his superstitious awe of the white man's power, and who, when once again he takes to the bush, combines the knowledge he has gained with the wild black's love of blood and slaughter.

'After all,' said Dick when they had discussed the half-caste, 'we'll pan out pretty straight yet, Sergeant. I don't see what's to hinder our starting after sun-up. We've got three guns, and if we keep to the open they'll never rush us. How many cartridges have you left?'

'Only four,' said Blake. 'I had to blaze away fast an' furious t' other day or they'd ha' had the lot o' us.'

'And we've got a couple of dozen,' said Dick. 'Tarbox turned 'em up for us, and lent Jerry his gun. That's eight shots apiece, and plenty, too, if we keep, say, about eighty yards of open all around us.'

‘Very well,’ cried Blake; ‘then do ye now lie down an’ rest a bit, Dick. I’ll keep watch and Jacky will mind the nags. We’re fresh enough; we’ve done nought but lie about all day, while you boys were tearin’ through the blazin’ sun to help us.’

The plan was good, and in less than five minutes Dick was stretched out beside Jerry and sleeping every whit as soundly as his comrade of the Lone Patrol.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BELEAGUERED.

FROM this deep sleep Dick was aroused by a pressure on the shoulder. He started up, to find the Sergeant leaning over him.

‘Jacky ain’t easy in his mind,’ said Blake in a low voice. ‘Says there’s niggers about, though I can’t make out a single sign of ’em.’

Dick sprang to his feet and looked round. He had slept several hours, but the cave looked just the same as when he lay down. The handful of fire burned in the corner; the crazy prospector sat brooding over it; Jerry was stretched in profound slumber on the sand. Dick had taken off his boots when he lay down, and he now slipped them on and accompanied Blake to the mouth of the cave. Here he found Jacky perched on top of the log ladder.

‘You bin thinkit warrigals alonga here, Jacky,’ said his master, dropping into the black’s lingo.

‘Yohi [yes],’ said Jacky. ‘Run through scrub; all same dingo.’

Dick fixed his eyes intently on the dark scrub which lined the other bank of the gully and waited for some sign of the presence of the enemy. It was now that time of the morning which the blacks term, in picturesque phrase, ‘Nerangi daylight,’ when the first beams of the dawn give a faint, ghostly glimmer of light.

‘Yes; they’re there,’ said Dick quietly.

‘How can you tell?’ asked Blake, who was a better policeman than bushman.

Dick rubbed his jaw. He found it very hard to say how

he knew, for the signs were so slight, yet he knew Jacky was right.

‘What’s the idea?’ said Blake when the Boy Scout had pointed out the tiny sounds which convinced him that the warrigals were in the scrub. These sounds were not, of course, made by the blacks themselves, for their movements were noiseless, but were made by the scrub animals darting out of the way of the dreaded hunters.

‘The idea?’ said Dick. ‘I don’t know. Can they rush the cave where the horses are?’

‘Not without coming under fire,’ replied Blake.

‘I’ll have a look round,’ said Dick. He slipped down the ladder, and Jacky followed. When he reached the ground, Dick turned and glanced about him. He stood at the foot of a cliff about forty feet high, and its face was honeycombed with the mouths of caves just as a bank is sometimes dotted with the holes in which sand-martins build. Only one hole was level with the ground, and Jacky pointed to it.

‘Yarramen in there,’ he said.

Dick entered, and found Whitesock and Dandy tethered in a corner of a cave twenty feet deep and some eight feet high. He glanced round it. The walls were solid on every hand, and a twist just at the mouth prevented the horses being seen from without. The animals were munching mulga-boughs, which, in default of better fodder, Jacky had fetched in during the night.

Dick gave a nod of satisfaction on discovering that the horses could not be speared unless the blacks actually entered the cave; he stroked Whitesock’s nose, and went back aloft.

‘I don’t see how they can rush us,’ said Blake.

‘Not up the log, anyhow,’ said Dick. ‘We could keep them out there if we’d nothing but stones to chuck on ’em. How far does this cave run back?’

‘Right into the hill,’ replied the Sergeant. ‘It’s a big,

ramblin' old hole, an' that, I expect, is why the warrigals picked it out for a place where the tribe might scuttle into when a bigger lot came after their kidney-fat.'

Dick nodded. He understood the Sergeant's allusion. When a wild black slays his enemy in battle he devours the kidney-fat of his dead foe, in the belief that by doing so he adds the skill, strength, and valour of the fallen warrior to his own.

'There's water farther in, about a dozen yards beyond the fire,' added Blake. 'So it's a very convaynient spot altogether.'

'Water?' said Dick. 'My word! at that rate a small party could laugh at a big tribe if they were once first up the ladder. Let's have a look at it.'

They left Jacky on guard and went down the cave. Blake picked up a burning stick from the fire, and as he did so Jerry woke up.

'Hello!' said Jerry; 'all quiet?'

'Just at present,' replied Dick; 'but there's a mob outside.'

Jerry grunted, got into his boots, sprang to his feet, stretched a big stretch, then followed the others.

'Here you are,' said Blake, and threw the light of his torch into a small recess cut in the living rock. From above, a tiny stream of water ran without a sound along the wall and was caught in a rocky basin some eighteen inches deep. The basin was brimming with the clearest water, and the overflow streamed away through a hole drilled in the rock.

'My word!' said Jerry; 'this is all right an' no mistake. This cave's been worth a bit to the tribe as owns it. Water on tap an' a safe hole to hide. The warrigals think a sight o' this spot, I know.'

'Let's go on a bit,' suggested Dick; and on they went. Here and there, as Blake flashed the light of the torch into

dusky recesses, could be seen blackened spots, places where fires had been lighted long since, and now and again there flashed out from the walls rude pictures and signs of tribal emblems. It was plain that the warrigals' hole, as Jacky called it, had been a refuge for many generations.

'What I want to find out,' said Dick, 'is whether there's another road into it. If there is, Yellow-skin and his friends might come in behind us and spear us before we knew there was anybody about.'

On they went, and the cave twisted and turned, yet the air kept fresh.

'It goes somewhere,' said Dick; but the words were scarcely out of his mouth when the Sergeant, who was a little in front with the torch, said, 'Hold hard!' and all three came to a standstill. Then the Boy Scouts stepped forward and saw that Blake had pulled up on the brink of a chasm. From side to side of the cave stretched a black, yawning gulf.

'How deep?' said Dick. He caught up a fragment of rock and tossed it in. Moment after moment passed; then from far, far below came a sullen plash. At an immense depth the stone had fallen into a pool of water.

'Holy saints!' murmured Blake, 'but here's a lively spot to come blunderin' on in the dark. Two or three steps careless-like an' where would a man be?'

Dick took the torch from the Sergeant's hand, lay down flat, and looked over the edge of the frightful pit. As far as the light threw its gleams the rock went down sheer as a wall, and there was no sign that it had ever been ascended or could be ascended. The leader of the Kangaroos got to his feet and looked up. Above his head the roof came to an end as sharply as the floor, and the explorers seemed to stand at the end of a tunnel, opening on a vast shaft, whose opposite side could not be seen.

'How far is it across?' said Jerry; and he took a stone

and threw it forward with all his strength. They stood listening, but there came no sound of the stone striking upon rock. Instead, after, as it seemed, a great time of waiting, there was a second splash, faint and hollow.

'My Colonial!' murmured Dick; 'this is a queer place.'

'Just about enough to give ye the creeps, I reckon,' said Jerry. 'But, I say, what a spot for warrigals to lie up when a big tribe had a down on 'em! No way in at the back, and in front they'd knock 'em off the doorstep as easy as winkin'.'

At this moment a sound came ringing and echoing down the cave behind them. It was the bark of a dingo, and they knew it for a warning-call from Jacky. Back they hurried at once, and found the blackboy uneasy because he had seen signs of the warrigals massing in the scrub on the other side of the gully.

'But they'll niver try to rush us,' protested Blake. 'I niver heard o' a mob o' blacks rushin' a place like this except against their own sort. They'll niver face guns.'

Dick shook his head. 'They are a tough lot,' he said; 'they're very wild, and they might have one go at us. They'll never get up here, of course; but I'd pretty well as soon have a spear in me as see 'em get one in Whitesock.'

'Ay, the horses,' said Blake. 'I'd forgotten them for the minute, and, by all the powers! we'd be in a fix without them just at present.'

'They ain't goin' to do anythin' just yet,' remarked Jerry, who had been watching the scrub with an experienced eye; 'so I'll get some breakfast. We'll all feel a bit better with a quart o' tea an' a lump o' damper inside.'

'Good for you, Jerry,' laughed Blake; 'that's the way to talk, like a practical bushman.'

'I'll toss up some flap-jacks in no time,' said No. 2; and away he went, and was soon whistling cheerfully as he mixed flour and water, made his flap-jacks in the lid of his

billy, cooked them over the fire, made tea, and served out a hearty breakfast to all hands save the prospector, who could not be persuaded either to eat or drink, and always crouched in his attitude of moody despair.

When the last mouthful of his breakfast had been despatched, Blake drew out his pipe, filled it, lighted it with a fire-stick, and strolled to the mouth of the cave. Scarcely had he gained it than there was a whistling hiss and something darted past his face. He leapt back with a fierce exclamation. 'A spear! a spear!' he cried. 'They're comin'! They're comin'!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ATTACK.

THE Boy Scouts sprang forward, and found that the Sergeant was partly right and partly wrong. A spear had been hurled at him, and he had taken that as a signal for onset; but on looking out they found the stretch of sand below the cave as empty as ever.

‘By all the powers!’ snorted Blake, ‘but they’re within spear-shot o’ us, the cunnin’ spalpeens. Where is it, then, they’re hidin’? ’Tis a reed-spear,’ he added, picking up the slender dart, which had broken against the rocky wall behind him.

‘Yes,’ said Jerry; ‘it was chucked out of a womera [a throwing-stick].’

The slender missile looked more like a plaything than a weapon. Yet it was a weapon, and a very deadly one, too. Give a black a reed-spear and a throwing-stick and he will drive the slight-looking dart clean through a man’s body, the barbs cutting an ugly, jagged wound and doing frightful mischief.

Dick crept up, posted himself under cover, and looked over the ground. ‘There they are,’ he said, pointing to a tuft of withered grass eighty yards away, the nearest patch of cover to the cave, but looking so small that it seemed scarcely possible for a kangaroo-rat to hide in it. But Dick knew the marvellous powers of the black-fellow in lying close in a place where no one would dream that a man could conceal himself, and felt certain there were several there.

‘They’ve been there a good bit,’ remarked Dick; ‘they must have crept up before the light. Hallo; look beyond!’

A black-fellow stepped into sight through an opening in the scrub, brandishing a bunch of spears in one hand and a boomerang in the other. He was a good sixty yards in the rear of the patch of bush where the spear-throwers lay hidden. With a sweep of his long black arm he hurled the boomerang, and it came humming into the cave.

'That's to try an' draw our fire or make us show ourselves,' muttered Blake. 'Lie low an' keep still. If we can only draw them out an' give 'em a right-down good pepperin' we'll be right. We can march home without havin' to look once over our shoulders.'

The savage now began to leap and dance and make all kinds of gestures of contempt. In a moment he was joined by others. The black forms glided out of the scrub here and there, until a score at least were dancing and yelling, while boomerangs flew into the mouth of the cave thick and fast.

'Seems to me they reckon we haven't got a shot left among us,' remarked the Sergeant. 'I'll alter their opinion. That might start 'em on the jump. If so we'd do the next jumpin', and in short order, too.'

He moved a little forward and was about to fire, when Jacky shouted, 'Mine thinkit warrigals come.'

Jacky was right. From the tiny tuft of cover leapt not one or two but seven of the enemy, and raced straight for the cave where the horses were. At the same moment the line behind swept forward, yelling like mad, and hurling boomerangs and spears to cover the assaulting party.

At the head of the latter was the half-caste.

'Mark that yellow brute!' shouted Blake; and both he and Dick fired into the bunch of running figures. Down went a big black, but the half-caste and the others ran on. Blake pumped lead into them as swiftly as he could pull the trigger, and at his fourth shot a tremendous roar of triumph burst from his lips. 'Got him!' cried the Sergeant as the



'Warrigals! Warrigals!' screamed the black boy, and pointed down the cave.

huge half-caste went down headlong, rolling over and over like a shot rabbit.

At the moment the Sergeant let out his victorious yell Jerry, who was waiting behind in reserve, felt Jacky seize his shoulder. Jerry looked round.

‘Warrigals! Warrigals!’ screamed the blackboy, and pointed down the cave. At that instant a frightful shriek rang out from the fire where the dazed prospector had been left.

‘They’re in the cave!’ shouted Jerry. ‘The niggers have got in behind us;’ and he darted down the cave, to behold a terrifying sight. Fully a score of huge blacks, their horrid, painted figures plainly to be seen in the light of the fire, were rushing up the cave. They came in without the faintest sound, for every one wore the kooditcha, the native shoe, which is even more noiseless than rubber and leaves no trace where it has been set, and one gigantic warrior, their leader, was well ahead of the rest.

He darted up to the prospector and raised his heavy fighting-spear. The man looked up, gave a wild cry on seeing his hated foes, the cry that had rung through the cave, and then made one tremendous bound on the black and seized him by the throat. Down they went headlong on the floor, and rolled over and over in furious wrestle.

The fall of these combatants cleared the way for Jerry to come into action, and his rifle flew to his shoulder and he fired swiftly into the clump of warriors, several of whom were seeking to drive their spears into the body of the white man at their feet. As the Boy Scout fired he ran forward to help the fallen man, and a few steps brought him into strong firelight, for flames were springing high from resinous logs.

Among the assailants was an old black-fellow, his beard and the hair matted on his sable chest as white as snow. But his arm was still strong, his aim good, and he flung a

heavy nulla-nulla with such skill that it took Jerry squarely on the right temple, and fetched him down as if he had been struck with a pole-axe.

Then the old black-fellow and two more leapt forward, caught up the fallen Scout, and hurried away with his senseless body into the depths of the cave.

So quickly had all this passed that Dick, delayed for a moment in checking the attack from without, ran up only to see the party retiring with Jerry in their midst. He had a shot left in his rifle, but he dared not use it; he might strike his friend. Clubbing his weapon, he bounded on faster still. But as he passed the fire a wounded black lying on the ground shot out a sinewy arm and took a firm grip of Dick's ankle. This brought the runner headlong to the earth, and a projecting point of the rocky floor struck him just above the eyes.

Dazed and confounded with the stunning blow, Dick scrambled slowly to his feet. The warrigal half-rose in his eagerness to strike one last blow at the hated foe, and poised a heavy fighting-spear. At the next instant this would have been driven into Dick's body had not Jacky rushed up. He had armed himself with the nulla-nulla which had brought Jerry down, and seeing the danger which menaced his young master, he lashed out with the heavy club and landed it with terrific force on the wild black's skull. Down sank the crouching figure, the spear fell, and Dick was saved.

Dick staggered on down the cave, quite unconscious of the danger in which he had stood, his only thought being to follow and rescue Jerry. But as his mind grew clearer he stopped to consider. How far was he from the great chasm? Supposing he were to stumble over the edge in the darkness. He turned and hurried back to the fire to obtain a torch, and here stood Blake shouting, 'Dick! Jerry! Where have you got to, lads? Where are you? The saints be praised!'

he cried as he saw Dick come out of the darkness; 'but here's one.—Where's Jerry?'

'They've got him,' replied Dick. 'I saw them carrying him away. They've gone down the cave. I want a fire-stick to search.'

'And I'll come with ye,' said Blake.—'Jacky, take some throwing-spears and watch at the mouth of the cave. I've cleared 'em off there for the present; but they might come back after the horses in less than no time.'

'Yes, Jacky,' said Dick; 'go and watch Whitesock and Dandy. We must keep them safe.'

The blackboy gathered some spears from the floor of the cave and went at once, and the other two caught up a burning stick apiece and ran along the cave.

But all was dark and silent before them, and they came at last to the brink of the awful chasm, and there was neither sight nor sound of any living being in the place. Again Dick flung himself flat and stared into the gulf. Had they descended? No; the wall fell away smooth, sheer, and unbroken. He leapt to his feet, raised his torch above his head, and looked round.

'Hallo! what's this?' he cried, and darted forward. Something was hanging flat against the farther wall and within a yard of the edge of the abyss.

It was a ladder, a ladder whose sides were ropes of twisted raw-hide, and whose rungs were of wood.

'Tis a ladder!' cried the Sergeant. 'They've gone that way. Where does it run to?'

'I'll soon see,' said Dick, and sprang forward. Then he paused as a sudden thought struck him. It might easily be that the ladder had been left in position as a decoy, and that a climber might be met at the top with a spear.

He stepped back and flung his torch aloft. It struck against a projection in the roof and threw out a hundred sparks and a burst of flame. By the momentary glare they

saw that the ladder led upwards to a ledge at a point where wall and roof met. More than that they could not discover.

'You see,' said Dick, 'there was a way in and out at the back after all.'

'Ay, I see it,' replied Blake; 'and the ladders's thrown down when wanted, for it was never there when we came before. And who'd dream of it? No man on earth could pick out yonder ledge in the dark above him. But they've pulled Jerry up there without a doubt, unless they'—and Blake paused, and looked uneasily at the yawning gulf.

'No,' said Dick decidedly. 'No, Sergeant. I don't believe that for a moment. Why should they trouble to bring poor old Jerry along here to throw him over when they could have speared him on the spot easily enough? No; they wanted to bag him for some reason or other, and that reason's got to be found out if we can work it.'

Dick's torch had fallen to the floor. He picked it up, relighted it at the one which Blake held, then gave a sharp tug at the ladder. It seemed to be very firmly fixed on the ledge above.

'Is it strong?' asked Blake.

'Take any weight,' replied Dick. 'Raw-hide and currajong sticks.' Currajong is a wood which cuts like cheese when it is green, but dries and seasons till it is as tough as steel.

'Well,' said Dick, 'I'm for going up and seeing what's happened to Jerry.'

'I dunno, Dick,' said Blake, rubbing his jaw. 'Think it's any use? Seems to me ye might very easily get cut up yourself, and do no good to Jerry. Sure, I'd do anythin' I could to help the poor lad; but if he's been settled, why, ye'd only be throwin' away another life for nothin'.'

'Scout's job, Sergeant,' said Dick briefly. 'I'm just bound to see if I can lend a hand to him, let things turn out how they may. I'll leave Jacky with you to watch the

outfit. Didn't I see some kooditchas on the black who dropped by the fire? I'll borrow em.'

Dick hurried back down the cave, and Blake followed.

'What's come to Bill?' said the latter. 'We've heard nought of him in the shindy.'

But Bill's shindies were over. They found him beside the fire, still gripping the throat of his enemy with fingers stiff in death. His body was riddled with spear-thrusts; but nothing had served to loose that bull-dog clutch, and his strangled foe lay beside him. Near at hand was the warrior whom Jacky had felled.

Dick pointed to their feet. 'Nobody would hear a sound as they came along,' said the boy. Both of the dead blacks wore the kooditcha. This is a kind of native shoe formed of emu's feathers and blood matted together. When wearing this a black leaves absolutely no impression on soil, wet or dry, rough or smooth; and Dick knew their value in moving on the tracks of so wary and keen-eyed a foe.

He whipped off his shoes, fastened on a pair of kooditchas, caught up his carbine, and was ready to go.

'How about ammunition?' asked Blake.

'I've got a single shot left,' said Dick. 'Any to spare?'

'I haven't got a cartridge,' replied the other. 'I cleared out my last one beating those off outside.'

CHAPTER XXV.

DICK GOES ON SCOUT.

DICK shrugged his shoulders. It was rather a black lookout to follow up the tracks of this savage mob with a single cartridge ; but there was nothing else for it. To desert a fellow-scout and leave poor old Jerry to his fate was not to be thought of for an instant.

He chose himself a fresh torch and returned to the ladder. It hung there just as before, and he ascended it slowly and carefully. He gained the ledge and flashed the light of his torch along it. It was not more than five or six feet wide, and at the back a ring of black marked the mouth of a small tunnel.

‘That’s the route,’ thought Dick, and moved towards it. As he went he saw that the ladder was fastened to a couple of short, strong posts set midway on the ledge.

‘And when the ladder isn’t wanted it’s packed away on this ledge out of sight,’ reflected Dick. ‘I wonder why they didn’t pull it up again when they came back with Jerry.’ It might have been an accident, for the black-fellows, in their excitement at making a capture, would be beside themselves with fierce glee, or it might have been meant for a trap ; and Dick moved with extreme wariness. He threw the light of his torch on every hand ; but all seemed quiet and deserted. He entered the tunnel, and found that as soon as the mouth was passed, the passage grew large and he could stand upright and walk with ease.

The tunnel twisted hither and thither as it wound its way through the hill, and Dick soon lost all sense of direction ; but he troubled little about that, since, should he once again come to the daylight, the position of the sun would soon

give him his bearings. At last he saw a faint light before him, and he pressed on faster and came to a spot where the tunnel seemed to run out into the open. But the outlet appeared to be completely covered by a thicket of the dreaded lawyer's-thorn, a bush armed with poisonous, thorny spines, and furnished with sharp claws which hook themselves into any man or beast rash enough to brush within reach of its dreaded embrace.

Yet the assailing party which had captured Jerry had gone out here. Dick bent down and examined the ground carefully. Either some of the blacks had not been provided with kooditchas or had lost them in the struggle, for Dick easily made out traces of very recent footmarks. There was no sign of Jerry's boot-prints, so he was still being borne along by his captors.

The tracks led to one corner of the outlet, and here Dick began to push at the thorny barrier with the butt of his rifle. Pressing on the stem of a large bush, he found that it swung easily outward, and he passed through the gap now made. He released the bush and it swung back into place, its own tough stem acting as the spring, and this entrance to the cave was altogether masked. Dick could not help glancing for an instant in admiration at the clever and complete way in which the tunnel was guarded.

'Well, this is the dead-finish,' thought he. 'Who'd ever dream the way in went through this bush? And everybody leaves lawyer's-thorn alone. It ain't at all healthy to meddle with it.'

Now he thought of his next movements, and first of all looked round him to gain some idea of where he stood. By the sun he had come north, and stood in a solitary rocky gully, naked save for a few thorny shrubs. He waited for a few moments, but could detect no sign of danger; then he began to follow up the track of the blacks.

The footmarks led him to the mouth of the gully, across a

large sandy flat, through a wide patch of broken scrub, and then they ran full out on to the main river-bed. Dick tucked himself into a patch of lignum scrub on the bank, and watched for a full ten minutes before he trusted himself in the open. Down-stream, a quarter of a mile away, he saw the boulder which marked the mouth of the gully down by Black Stone Creek, and he recognised that he must have come clean through the heart of the high ridge which lay between him and the other entrance of the cave.

After a most careful survey of both banks, Dick was just deciding that it was time to strike across the broad dry bed when he heard a terrific yell break out in the distance. Thrice it was repeated; then the silence once more became profound. At once Dick sprang from his cover and began to press swiftly along the tracks. 'Wish you'd sung out before,' he said half-aloud, apostrophising the distant blacks; 'then you'd have saved my time.'

For Dick knew the ways of warrigals, and that yell had told him at once that the whole tribe was gathered together, and that there was nothing to be feared from detached scouting-parties.

'They're on the corroboree-ground,' thought Dick, 'and that's where they've taken Jerry;' and the leader of the Lone Patrol hurried on faster still with an uneasy heart, for he had heard more than once of sacrifices being offered up to tribal gods, and the intended fate of his follower and friend might be a terrible one.

Within ten minutes he was quite close to the encampment of the warrigals near the corroboree-ground, and now Dick moved with the utmost wariness and caution. A single false step and it would be all over, not only with his hopes of aiding Jerry, but with himself as well. Should he be discovered he had only a single shot with which to defend himself, and a shower of spears and boomerangs would be his instant portion.

He was not approaching the scene by the line they had taken the night before; that would not have done at all. To peer down from the overhanging bluff was very well in the darkness; but by day it was no place to make for. So Dick took a cast round the forest which lay beyond the corroboree-ground, and worked up to the gathering-place from quite the opposite direction.

As the trees thinned, he moved cautiously from trunk to trunk, and suddenly he saw the warrigals' camp, a straggling row of bark gunyahs on a little flat beside a lagoon. He watched the little, rude huts intently, but no creature was to be seen about them. They had all gone to the corroboree-ground, which was separated from the camp by a thick grove of bunya-trees, the abundance of which trees gave its name to the river.

'Nobody at home,' thought Dick. 'I wish I could get into those bunnies and work through 'em. I'd see then what was going on over there. Hallo! what's that?'

Something lying before the nearest gunyah had caught his eye. It was a garment, but certainly not a native rug, which was all the garment these warrigals ever knew, and then only as a coverlet at night. Dick drew nearer and saw that it was a police tunic.

'My Colonial!' he muttered; 'if that isn't the yellow nigger's gunyah, I'm another nigger. What about that thirty rounds of ammunition he bagged? Is it inside? What stunning luck if I could get my hands on it! I'll have a try, anyway.'

He crept forward, moving on the soft kooditchas with the noiselessness of a shadow, and entered the tiny hut, built of sheets of bark set on a rude framework. In a corner was a heap of furs, half-covering a big dilly-bag. Dick's heart beat fast as he caught up the bag, for here was the place to find the ammunition if any should be left. Yes; there lay the cartridge-box and belt mixed with a mass of odds and

ends. Dick snatched up the box and opened it. He choked back a cry of delight, for it was nearly full. Snatching them out, he stowed away the cartridges in his pocket. Twenty-one were left, so that only nine had been fired away before the half-caste lost his carbine, and now carbine and cartridges were once more in the same hands in this strange fashion.

Dick now made haste to leave the gunyah and cross to the grove. The camp was utterly deserted, and he gained the shelter of the trees in safety. He worked his way through the jungle slowly and soundlessly, and soon saw that the trees were thinning before him. At the edge of the grove, crouching in shelter of a tangle of Wonga vine, he glanced out and saw the bank of the lagoon lined with the warrigals. Then his eye caught another feature of the scene, and Dick's face blanched with horror. What on earth were they doing with Jerry? Let us see.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JERRY'S FATE.

WHEN Jerry came to himself after that crashing blow received from the nulla-nulla, he was being carried swiftly across the river-bed ; nor was he set on his feet until he had been conveyed to the corroboree-ground, where he was laid down in a circle drawn in the hardened soil. His hands and feet were at once bound with strips of hide, and a dozen warriors sat down to watch him.

‘This is a new move,’ thought Jerry. ‘What’s the idea? Warrigals don’t generally lug you off when they’ve downed you. The regular thing is to drive a dozen spears in.’

He was about to speak to his captors in the native tongue, when he refrained and remained silent. He would wait a bit. It might be all the better for him to keep to himself the fact that he understood their speech ; he might pick up useful information.

Almost at once the tribe gathered around the circle—men, women, and piccaninnies ; all ran to look upon the captive. To Jerry’s surprise, they assailed him neither with sticks nor abuse. They looked upon him with savage hatred shining in their fierce eyes ; but he was left quite unmolested.

Then a great shout arose, a shout of triumph and greeting. The crowd opened, and through its ranks came the big half-caste. The Sergeant had put a bullet through his shoulder, and his right arm hung useless at his side, and he was streaming with blood. But as long as a wound is not mortal a black-fellow takes but little heed of it, and his immense vitality often pulls him through where a white man would succumb.

Jerry understood the cry. He knew that in English it would run something like this: 'Come, O great chief, and see the white man! Come and see the prisoner thou didst promise us!'

'Ah!' thought Jerry; 'wanted a prisoner, did they? That accounts for me being fetched here.' Then he looked up and saw the half-caste standing before him.

'Well, we've got you all right,' said the half-caste quietly.

Jerry's eyes opened in surprise. This was no black-fellow's talk. The half-caste spoke English perfectly. Then Jerry remembered that he had had a white father, an old combo who had taken to savage life.

'Looks like it,' said Jerry. 'What's the idea?'

'The idea is that I want your horses, rifles, and ammunition,' replied the half-caste. 'This tribe of mine is weak; I want to make it strong. With firearms I can lead them against a great tribe of the north, and can take fine hunting-grounds.'

'Yes; and take yourself safely out o' the way o' the Mounted Police,' said Jerry. The shot told. At the mention of the force from which he had deserted the half-caste winced uneasily. The native troopers of the Mounted Police are most terribly dreaded by their fellow-blacks. The warrigal knows that he can escape from the white man; but he cannot hide his line of flight from the trackers of the police. They know all that he knows; they can follow whither he has fled, and when they come up with their prey, then there is a terrible vengeance taken. For the native trooper is never tired of killing his fellow-blacks. He will slay and slay until not a man of the offending tribe is left, unless he is called off by his officers. And the half-caste knew all this.

'If you white-fellows will give me your horses and the other things you shall go free,' said the half-caste.

'How far?' asked Jerry dryly.

'To your homes,' replied the other.

'Do you want me to go and tell them that?' asked Jerry.

'No,' said the half-caste; 'you can write a message to them with a black stick on a sheet of bark. Then when the things are given up you may all go free.'

Jerry shook his head. The whole thing was nonsense. He knew where he was too well for that. If the weapons and horses were given up, the blacks would wait till they were helpless, and then spear every one remorselessly.

'No go,' said Jerry; 'we shouldn't get a mile on the road.'

At this moment the tribe began to yell and dance. Jerry looked round and saw that they had formed a passage, and between their ranks came a wild and grotesque figure, a small, wizened old black-fellow, daubed with paint and bedizened with feathers. This was the doctor and priest of the tribe, and as he came into the ring the warrigals began to scream some words in a wild chant. Jerry listened and caught the gist of the cry. It ran: 'Throw now the white-fellow to the bunyip—to the bunyip! Throw now the white-fellow to the bunyip!'

Jerry was puzzled. What could it mean? He had heard of the bunyip many scores of times; but he did not believe it existed. In the tales of the blacks the bunyip is a dreadful and mysterious monster which haunts the depths of lonely lagoons and wild water-holes, and snatches down those who incautiously venture within its reach.

'Will you write the message?' asked the half-caste.

'No, I won't,' replied Jerry, 'for fear my friends should agree to it in hopes of seein' me back again.'

'But they would see you again,' said the half-caste.

'Yes; in the sweet by-and-by,' replied the cool and undaunted Jerry, 'but not this side of Jordan, I know.'

'If you do not write what I wish I will hand you over to these black-fellows,' said the half-caste.

'That's all right,' replied Jerry; 'you'd do that, anyhow.'

'And they will fling you to the bunyip.'

'Oh, come off that log,' remarked Jerry; 'there ain't no bunyip. Never was an' never will be.'

The half-caste showed his white teeth in a smile which was not a cheerful thing to see.

'These fellows have a bunyip,' he said; 'they worship it. But they have met with so much ill-fortune for many moons that they think the bunyip is angry with them. They have thrown to it three fat young lubras [girls]; but the ill-luck does not change. If they throw a white-fellow to it, surely it will be pleased, and all will be well once more.'

Jerry scarcely knew what to make of this. He had heard many stories of the bunyip, just as one hears stories of dragons, but did not believe in the one any more than the others.

The half-caste saw that Jerry did not mean to yield, and his yellow face darkened with anger. He made a gesture with his unwounded arm, and the brave Scout was at once seized and a strong band of hide was fastened about his middle, and amid a yelling, shouting crowd he was dragged to the bank of the lagoon.

'They're goin' to drown me,' thought Jerry; 'that's what they meant by throwin' me to the bunyip;' and he set his teeth fiercely to keep back any cry when he should go splash! a helpless bundle, into the water.

At this point a tiny cliff ten or twelve feet high with perpendicular sides formed the border of the lagoon, and below this cliff lay a broad, deep pool, its sides fringed with the great leaves of water-lilies. Growing on the bank was a great Ti-tree, the trunk of which, instead of shooting straight up, slanted outwards across the water at such an angle that a black with his almost prehensile feet could easily walk up the trunk. Fifteen feet up the trunk a strong branch shot out, and around the root

of this branch was fastened a strong rope of hide. The other end of the rope was held by a native standing on the trunk, and it was now made fast to the stout surcingle of hide which was bound about Jerry's middle.

The rope was made fast by the hideously bedecked witch-doctor, and it was by his hand that Jerry was thrust over the cliff and sent swinging out over the pool.

Jerry thought they meant to drown him near the surface, so that they might enjoy his struggles. But no; at the lowest point of his swing he was still several feet from the surface of the pool, and there he swung to and fro like a huge pendulum. As the rope tightened on him, the band to which it was fastened moved up rather than down, so that his head was somewhat higher than his feet, and he could glance round and see all that went on.

'Spears next,' said Jerry to himself, glancing at the crowd; but no hand was raised to fling a missile at this tempting mark, and still he swung to and fro, to and fro. Then he saw that the blacks were looking intently, not at him, but at the surface of the lagoon.

'Waitin' for the bunyip,' reflected Jerry. 'They'll wait a tidy bit, I reckon. Some o' their debbil-debbil foolery.'

But the mob now fell so silent and watched the depths of the pool with such eagerness that Jerry, in spite of his disbelief in the bunyip, was impressed, and could not help looking down into the water below him. Immediately below the lowest point of the arc which his body was describing as it swung there was a wide, clear, open space of water, free of all lily-leaves, and suddenly Jerry made out a movement far down in the clear water. Up he swung out of sight and then back, and he looked down more eagerly still. Yes; there was something there, and it was slowly rising. The next time he crossed the pool he gave a gasp of horror. Some huge, awful thing was coming swiftly to the surface, and the Boy Scout's

face went white and his heart beat thick as he saw it and grasped what it was. He recognised its immense form; he saw its small, evil eyes shining through the water, and he knew that a vast alligator was rising from its home in the depths of the lagoon and coming to seize the prey offered to it by its worshippers.

A tremendous yell from the mob of the blacks announced the arrival of the dreadful creature which they adored, and then there was silence once more as the huge reptile broke the surface of the pool with its ridged back and floated there like a log, its eyes protruding from the water and watching with their frightful, fixed stare the body which swung to and fro, to and fro, above its head.

Suddenly the alligator reared in the water and made a snap at the swinging figure. It missed; but Jerry had a frightful glimpse into a huge, cavernous, yellow mouth, whose great jaws were lined with rows of murderous teeth. The attempt was hailed with a rapturous yell from the mob of warrigals, who, though they might worship the creature, yet took advantage of a sacrifice to cause it to minister to their delight in the horrible by giving it trouble in seizing its prey. Again its vast mouth swung open with a strange, dreadful coughing sound, and it struck its tail deeper in the water and snapped again. This time the teeth clashed together within a foot of Jerry's head, and the blacks danced and yelled with delight to see how near the huge saurian had struck and yet missed. Then it turned, swam some thirty yards away, and swung its immense length round. The mob gave a great shout, and fell silent to watch the final scene. The frightful reptile meant to gain ample impetus for a spring which would place its jaws safely round the proffered prey. It raised its scaly tail, lashed the surface of the lagoon into foam, then shot forward at full speed for the swinging body of the Scout.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DICK TO THE RESCUE.

UP leapt the mighty saurian, and now it reared itself high from the water. But once more its huge jaws closed upon the empty air. This time nothing had saved Jerry save the pendulum-like swing of his body at the end of the raw-hide rope. Had he been hanging straight down he would have been torn under water at once in that dreadful snatch.

Upon missing again, the huge reptile sank a little into the pool and lay there sullenly, its evil eyes fixed upon the swaying body. The blacks set up a cry of alarm. Much as they had enjoyed its frantic efforts to seize their proffered sacrifice, they feared lest it should return to its lair below without being propitiated by success. In that case they dreaded its anger, and a further spell of ill-luck in their hunting and fishing.

Several of the chief men demanded that the rope should now be loosed and the victim hurled into the pool, and this proposal was received with great shouts of applause. The duty of finally offering up the sacrifice fell to the priest and doctor of the tribe, and he now stepped from the bank and walked slowly up the sloping trunk of the Ti-tree. When he came to the fork where the rope was fastened, he squatted down and began to untie the elaborate knots, for it would have caused the most terrible ill-luck had the rope been severed with a knife or spear-head. But his task was soon to be interrupted, and in a fashion very unpleasant for himself.

It was at the moment of the alligator's last rush that Dick peered through the tangle of Wonga vine, and he

took in the situation at a glance. The ground ran down from him to the mob of blacks and the lagoon, and he could see everything.

'My Colonial!' he muttered. 'They're swinging Jerry at the end of a rope while a thundering big alligator jumps at him! What's to be done?'

Within the next moment he saw what was to be done. The black doctor must be checked in untying that rope, or Jerry was lost for ever. Suddenly the gins and lubras below struck up a wild chant of praise to the huge creature they worshipped, and an instant later the men joined in, until every warrigal there was shouting at the top of the voice, and the din was deafening. The noise seemed oddly redoubled, and Dick instantly divined the cause. There was a powerful echo from the wall of the bluff which bordered the corroboree-ground, and a use for that echo flashed into the quick mind of the patrol-leader.

He laid his rifle in a stout fork of the vine before him, and drew a careful bead on the black figure squatting in the fork of the Ti-tree. Jerry's life hung on that shot, and Dick knew it. But his strong young hand was steady as a rock, and the sights were laid with deadly aim on the grotesque figure of the medicine-man.

Crack! the rifle spoke, the ball sped on its way, and struck the mark to a miracle. With a bullet in his brain the black-fellow pitched forward and fell like a plummet straight into the horrible jaws of the waiting reptile. There was one swift flurry of blood-stained water and the huge alligator sank, well content, to his lair at the bottom of the pool. What mattered it to him that he bore away the sacrificing priest instead of the helpless intended sacrifice?

The chant was cut short on every lip, and a profound silence of utter awe and terror held every warrigal in its grip for a moment. This black doctor had been a very famous hoodoo-man, noted for his mighty spells; and the

means by which he had been torn from them and flung to the monster were, for the instant, quite incomprehensible. Their own uproar had completely drowned the noise of the shot, and it seemed to them that only by some marvellous piece of witchcraft could this thing have been brought about.

The next moment brought the crowd of trembling warrigals terror of another kind ; for once, twice, thrice the rifle rang out from the vines, and the balls hummed among them, and high and clear came the shrill, ringing scream which bursts from the lips of the black-tracker when he shoots down the warrigal whom he pursues. The shots, the long-drawn yell, imitated by Dick with marvellous fidelity, were echoed and re-echoed from the walls of the bluff, and the shaken mob never dreamed but that their arch-enemies, the most awful and dreaded of foes, the black-police, were upon them.

They found their voices again in one terrific yell of alarm, then fled. One and all, they streamed across the corroborree-flat and darted into the forest. In an incredibly short time there was not the faintest trace of a warrigal to be seen, and the half-caste had fled at their head, for he, above all, had reason to dread his old comrades. And from the Ti-tree Jerry still swung to and fro.

Dick gave a cry of delight, leapt from his cover, and ran at full speed for the lagoon.

‘I’m coming, Jerry!’ he cried as he ran. ‘It’ll be all right now. Those beggars won’t stop running for a mile.’

He gained the bank of the lagoon, slinging the rifle over his shoulder as he went, bounded up the tree, the kooditchas giving him perfect foothold, dropped at the fork, and caught the raw-hide rope. Hauling on it with all his might, he fetched Jerry up, hand over hand, or rather hand under hand, and swung him across the trunk. Dizzy and dazed, Jerry had hardly been his own man now for some

little time ; but he knew his leader, and said feebly, 'Hello, Dick !'

'Soon have you right, old chap,' replied Dick, and whipped out his knife and severed Jerry's bonds. But Jerry was so stiff that he could only crawl very slowly and awkwardly along the trunk, and had it not been for Dick's helping hand he would now actually have rolled into the lagoon. But at length they reached the bank, and a few moments' rubbing put life again into Jerry's benumbed ankles. As soon as Jerry could hobble, they made the best of their way towards Black Stone Creek. Luckily it lay in the direction opposite to that which the warrigals had taken in their flight.

'My word, Dick,' gasped Jerry, 'I thought I was a baked potato that time! They said they were goin' to chuck me to a bunyip. I laughed. I thought it was all my eye. But they'd got in stock all the bunyip I wanted, after all. Did somebody tumble in? I've half an idea I heard a splash.'

Dick explained the situation, and Jerry was fervent in gratitude.

'Dry up,' said the leader; 'we're bound to stand by one another in the Lone Patrol. Rum sort of Boy Scouts we should be if we didn't.'

They pushed ahead as sharply as possible, and to their great relief opened up to view Black Stone Gully without any sign of pursuit.

As they ran up the gully—for Jerry could now move with his old nimbleness—the latter burst into a fit of laughter. 'I say, Dick,' he said, 'that was just about the dead-finish what happened to that old conjurer. Fancy, he was just goin' to drop me plunk into the 'gator's mouth, an' he went head-first in himself. I ain't ever heard a better joke than that ;' and Jerry chuckled gleefully.

'I wish it had been that yellow brute,' said Dick. 'He's

been the bad egg all along, and I believe he's hopped off with nothing much.'

'Only a bullet through his shoulder,' said Jerry; 'an' it was a clean cut, too. In one side, out t'other. He'll be as right as rain in a week, the way those fellows pull round.'

Suddenly a loud and joyous cheer rang out before them. Blake had seen them coming, and he and Jacky now tumbled at full speed down the log ladder to greet the returning Scouts.

'You're safe, lads!' cried Blake. 'An' unhurt?'

'Safe and unhurt, Sergeant,' said Dick; 'and now we'd better hook it. That mob is pretty badly rattled for the present, and we'll clear off while we've got the chance.'

All turned to with a will, and in a very short time the party was in marching order. Dick now took Blake by the sleeve and spoke to him in a low voice.

'Look here, Sergeant,' said the patrol-leader. 'What about that poor chap aloft—Bill the prospector?'

'That's all right, my lad,' replied Blake. 'While you were away, me and Jacky, we set to an' buried him. Poor chap! that was all we could do for him. If he'd had nine lives there were enough spear-wounds in him to let 'em all out.'

Without further delay the little cavalcade left Black Stone Gully and struck out for home. The Sergeant rode White-sock, and Jerry and Dick rode double on Dandy, while Jacky trotted on foot, and kept up with the horses as easily as a dingo loping alongside. Of their journey back to Ballamoola there is nothing to tell. They camped one night, and arrived at the station before the sunset of the next day in safety. Dick found everything at Ballamoola just as he had left it. His mother had not come back from Narana, and the two blackboys had kept things straight about the station, and Tarbox was a great deal better. The Sergeant

spent a night with them, then went on the next morning, having borrowed a couple of horses. He departed to make his report, and to gather a force to give the Bunya River blacks a good drubbing; for a tribe that has once drawn the blood of a white man is a very dangerous mob until it has received a severe lesson.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JERRY'S DANDY.

ON a morning of choking, baking heat, rather more than six weeks after the trip to the Bunya River, Dick was leading Whitesock towards their homestead. The pony was in harness, and was drawing a light wagon containing a water-cask. Dick was returning from a trip to the water-hole down the creek, and the cask contained the daily supply for the station.

As he drew up at the door his mother came out of the living-room.

'How does it stand now in the hole, Dick?' she asked.

'Oh, pretty fair, mother,' replied Dick. 'It's a bit lower than it was yesterday, but not a lot.'

'I don't know what we shall do if the hole gives out,' said Mrs Barry; 'there won't be a drop nearer than Narana. I've known some dry times, but this is the worst I've ever seen or heard of.'

'Perhaps there'll be rain before we're done up altogether,' said Dick; and he glanced at the sky, as every one throughout that stretch of country was doing a hundred times a day. But there seemed no hope there. Not a cloud had sailed over its surface for months, and it was more than a year since rain had last fallen.

Dick shook his head with a hopeless gesture at sight of the brassy expanse which stretched from horizon to horizon, and turned to get the cask from the wagon. Jacky ran up to help, and they were about to lift it down, when Dick paused and looked up the track.

'Here's somebody coming,' he said.

'Is it your father?' cried Mrs Barry hastily, and ran to look.

'No,' said Dick ; 'it's old Jerry on Dandy.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Barry in a disappointed tone, and sighed.

They were expecting the owner of the station home every day now. He and his mate, M'Lean, had gone away the day after Dick's return from the Bunya River on a prospecting trip, and they had promised to return within a month, as the patch of country where they had heard that gold existed lay at no great distance, some hundred and twenty miles away. But the day of their return was now overdue, and there was no sign of the prospectors.

In a few minutes Jerry jogged up to the door, got down, and saluted his leader, who returned the civility. At this moment Mrs Barry came out of the house again.

'Good-morning, Jerry,' she said. 'How's everybody on the Creek?'

'They're quite healthy, thank you, Mrs Barry,' replied Jerry.

'That's right,' she said ; 'and you've just got here in time for dinner. Come in with Dick.'

'Thank you, Mrs Barry,' said Jerry ; and the two boys went away together to see Whitesock and Dandy stabled and made comfortable.

It was not long before Dick suspected that something was wrong. He had not seen Jerry for more than a week, and scarce as news was in so thinly populated a country, Jerry had generally got something to talk about after not seeing a friend for that length of time. But the corporal of the Kangaroos had little or nothing to say, and munched at his dinner with as thoughtful an air as an old horse chewing a feed.

'Look here, Jerry,' said Dick at last. 'What's wrong?'

Jerry looked at Dick and smiled a little ruefully. 'Well, for one thing,' he murmured gently, 'uncle's bust.'

Dick whistled, and Mrs Barry cried out in sympathy, 'Oh Jerry, have all your cattle gone?'

'Yes, Mrs Barry,' replied Jerry; 'the last o' the mob pegged out yes'day afternoon.'

'Oh, this cruel, cruel drought!' cried Mrs Barry. 'That's the last station this way gone except Narana. Oh, when will the rain come?'

She glanced through the window at the withered desolation of Ballamoola; at the field beyond the river which she had seen knee-deep in rich grass, and now lay brown and bare beneath the rays of a sun which blazed in the sky like a ten-times heated furnace.

'What are your uncle and aunt going to do, Jerry?' asked Mrs Barry.

'Oh, going down to Kangaroo Flats. They want a stockman,' said Jerry.

'Then they're leaving the Creek?'

'They've got to, worse luck,' said Jerry. 'You see, uncle borrowed a lot o' money from the bank to go on with; an' now he's bust, the bank will come down on him an' collar the station. That's what he told me.'

Dick and his mother murmured some words of sympathy with a plight which was a little worse than their own; for Ballamoola was, at any rate, a free homestead, and not one burdened with a heavy mortgage.

'But what bothers me,' went on Jerry, 'is what I'm goin' to do about Dandy. It seems these people lay hold o' everythin' they find about the place, an' Dandy belongs to me. Old Steel, o' Dunga Ridge, gave him to me when he was only a little colt, an' I've brought him up. I don't want to lose Dandy.'

'Not likely,' said Mrs Barry; 'keep him here, Jerry. There's plenty of room in the stable, for the master took the other horses with him on his trip.'

'Yes, yes,' cried Dick; 'there's only Whitesock in the stable. And Dandy will be safe here.'

'Thank you,' said Jerry gratefully; 'fact is, I've come

here this mornin' on the chance you'd take him. I didn't know anywhere else to ask; but I felt sure you'd lend me a hand.'

'Rather!' cried Dick; 'and the best plan is for you to stop here as well. Do they want you over on the Creek?'

'No,' said Jerry; 'it doesn't matter if I don't turn up for a month.' So it was settled that Jerry should stop at Ballamoola for the present.

'I can tell you I didn't mean goin' back just yet, anyhow,' went on Jerry in a moment, 'for I've brought my swag with me, an' I'd have camped out somewhere till old Dandy was safe.'

Mrs Barry smiled and Dick chuckled. 'So that's what that bundle means done up in your blanket, eh?' said the latter; and Jerry nodded.

'I brought the things I wanted most to keep safe,' said Jerry. 'My Scout-kit, and some clean shirts and that sort of thing.'

'But they can't touch your clothes because your uncle owes them money,' said Dick. 'I've heard father say that.'

'Ah,' said Jerry, and shook his head again. He, at any rate, was taking no chance about his Scout-kit, and had carried it out of reach of any possible danger.

'The queer thing is that one o' our blacks has been sayin' that a big flood's comin',' said Jerry. 'I don't see how he makes it out; but uncle thinks a lot o' the old chap, an' always believes he's right.'

'Whatever comes, it will be too late to save our poor beasts,' said Mrs Barry with a sigh.

'I haven't seen the least sign of rain myself,' said Dick. 'No such luck, I'm afraid.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FLOOD.

IT was on Friday that Jerry turned up at Ballamoola, and on the next Monday morning he and Dick were filling the cask at the water-hole, when they saw some blacks approaching. This duty of filling the cask was one which Dick always saw to himself. If the blackboys were sent they might be careless and waste some, and every drop of waer was now precious.

As the natives drew near, the boys saw that it was a family party. There were two men—one a straight, muscular young fellow ; the other an old, white-headed patriarch—three women, two gins and a young lubra, and five children. The men carried a bundle of spears apiece, and the women were laden with the household goods, bark coolimans, dilly-bags stuffed with odds and ends, and one old gin had hanging round her neck a big snake, which was to serve as food at the next camping-place.

They were a harmless party, and hurried up at once when they saw that the boys were bailing water. They begged for a drink, and all squealed for joy when Dick poured water into the cooliman—a vessel formed of bark bent into the shape of a small trough—which the old gin adorned with the snake held out. When they had had a drink all round and had become very friendly, Dick asked them where they were going. The old black-fellow pointed to a lofty ridge some miles away, and said they were making for it to escape the flood. Dick asked what flood he meant. The old fellow pointed to the north, and declared that before another day had passed the plains would be under water ; so they were going to the hills, where they would be safe, and would have

plenty of food, for all kinds of wild creatures would be driven to the high ground as a refuge. Then he called upon his followers to make speed, and the party hurried on as if not a moment were to be lost.

Dick and Jerry looked at each other in wonder as the blacks went quickly across the big flat beyond the creek-bed towards the ridge.

'There's something in this,' said Dick; and Jerry nodded.

'That old chap knows,' said Jerry; 'he ain't goin' to make any mistake about it at his time o' life. An' yet, look round.'

The boys looked round. They saw the same glaring sun; the same burnt-up scene, shimmering and quivering in the heat haze which they had seen so long; and rain seemed as far away as ever. Then they turned to their work and hoisted the barrel into the wagon. It was a light American wagon fitted with shafts for one or a pole for a pair, and this morning the pole was in, and Whitesock and Dany harnessed as a pair. Dick took the reins and turned the horses' heads homewards.

The road from the water-hole to Ballamoola did not follow the creek-bank closely, for the latter was encumbered with brushwood, and no vehicle could find a track. So it was necessary to swing out half a mile to a sandy flat, work across that, then return to the creek by a long down-slope, cross the bed a little below the station, and pull home uphill, climbing the bank on which the homestead was built.

The wagon had just gained the beginning of the down-slope to the crossing, when through the hot, silent air there came a distant muffled sound.

'What's that?' said Dick. 'Sounds like a mob of horses coming full gallop.'

'Yes, or a mob o' cattle,' remarked Jerry; 'an' there's neither horses nor cattle in this part o' the country, worse luck.'

'Queer,' said Dick. 'Is it distant thunder?'

'No!' shouted Jerry. 'Look! look!' and he pointed to

a distant bend of the creek. 'The flood! the flood! It's coming like mad. Send 'em along, Dick, or we'll never get over the creek.'

Dick gave one swift glance, then gathered up the reins and cracked the whip over the horses' backs. Both were fresh, and neither wanted urging. Away they went at the best speed they could make, and the wagon lurched and bumped and jumped as it bounced over the stones and logs and dug its wheels into the yielding sand of the rough, uneven track.

Dick's quick glance had shown him a tawny wave of water, crested with shining foam, darting along the deep, dry bed like a racehorse, and now it was a race between them and the flood.

'We'll do it,' snapped Dick; 'there's a big curve between that bend and the crossing, and the flood's got to run round that.'

'We've got to be jolly quick,' said Jerry; 'that water's comin' along at a lively bat, I can tell ye.'

'We must do it,' cried Dick; 'we might be cut off from home for days if the flood gets down first.'

Again he cracked his whip, and the horses drove themselves into their collars and whirled the light wagon along more madly still. Dick glanced over his shoulder.

'Chuck the water-barrel out, Jerry,' he said. 'It's only dead-weight now, and it seems as if we sha'n't be short of water for the present.'

Jerry flung down the tail-board of the wagon, then set his knee against the load—how precious a few minutes ago!—and trundled it overboard without ceremony. Next he stood bolt-upright, and with his feet set well apart and balancing himself in the lurching wagon like a sailor in a tossing boat, he kept an eager watch on the corner of the creek just above the crossing.

'Rush 'em along!' roared Jerry. 'I see the water

breakin' over the side o' the creek up-stream. She'll be a banker right away.'

A 'banker' is a stream which fills the creek to the very edge of the banks. So this was no common flood to fill the deep bed at its first onrush.

Dick nodded and steadied his galloping team for the dip down to the bed of the creek. As he did so Jerry yelled, 'Here she comes!'

Dick looked, and then took his horses by the head and cracked the whip over them, and set them straight at the broad white bed. Nothing but great speed and pluck could save them; but Whitesock and Dandy had both, and Dick left the battle to them. Two hundred yards up-stream a huge wall of water whirled into sight, yellow and turbid, crested with foam, and roaring dully as it came.

The horses caught the sound, and by instinct divined the danger. Pulling like mad creatures, they threw the soft, deep sand behind them in clouds as they drove their feet into the yielding bed. It was a cruelly hard task, for the wheels bit deeply in; and twenty yards from the farther bank the off-wheel sank into a soft patch, and the wagon, despite the tremendous efforts of Whitesock and Dandy, almost came to a standstill.

Dick threw the whip into the wagon and leapt down on one side. Jerry bounded out on the other. What for? To race to the bank and secure their own deliverance from the all-engulfing wave now dashing upon them? Not at all. To seize each his own animal and urge them on to safety with voice and tug at bridle. The cool Scouts eyed the racing flood, eyed the bank, and were resolved not to mount the latter alone. Released of their weight, the struggling beasts plucked the wagon out of the soft place with one tremendous heave of straining shoulders and quivering flanks, then rushed forward, while the Boy Scouts yelled encouragement and ran beside them.

'Hooray!' roared Jerry as they gained the foot of the bank and sprang up it.

'Up! Up!' cried Dick. 'It's just on us!'

They rushed forward, the horses bearing fiercely on their bits, and with its dull roar as of a thousand charging hoofs the flood swept upon them.

It flung the crest of its advancing wave full into the wagon, and swept clean over horses and boys, but not with such sufficient force to tear them from their foothold. On they struggled, gasping and panting; crawled over the lip of the bank; and paused not five feet above the raging torrent. As they stopped and looked down, a great Ti-tree, stripped by the force of the stream to the bare trunk, struck with a heavy thud against the earth upon which they had been standing a moment before. This was sucked away and carried off at great speed in the rush of the wild, foaming waters.

'Lucky that tree wasn't in the wave that hit us,' said Jerry; and Dick nodded soberly.

They now patted and soothed the frightened horses, then got into the wagon and toiled up the rise to Ballamoola. Here they found Mrs Barry in great anxiety lest they should have been cut off by the swollen creek, and she was very glad to see them safe at home on the right side of it.

'We just got across in time,' said Dick; 'but it was a close call. We had a soaking as we nipped up the bank.'

'Look how it's rising!' cried Jerry. 'My word! she's fillin' up tremendous!'

The creek was indeed filling up with startling and dreadful speed. Below Ballamoola the channel was deep, and confined on either side by a rocky wall, and the water in this channel was rising foot by foot before their eyes. But the opposite bank was twenty feet lower than that on which the station was built, and this would allow the water to rush over a flat more than two miles across before it was pulled up against the foot of the rocky ridge.

'Ballamoola's safe enough,' said Jerry.

'I should think so,' replied Dick. 'The water would have to fill the big flat and back up again from the ranges before it began to climb this side.'

'My word!' said Jerry, 'it would be a No. 1 flood to do that. But, I say, there's been tremendous rain back in the hills to send down a snorter like this.'

'And not the faintest sign of it as far as we can see,' remarked Dick. Jerry nodded, and the boys swept the horizon with a gaze that showed them the same clear sky, the same burning sun-glare, as before.

'Good job we got across,' said Dick as their glance returned to the roaring torrent.

'Rather!' said Jerry; 'there'd have been no chance till she ran out again.'

There would, indeed, have been no chance. The broad bed of the creek was filled with a furious foaming stream, in which no boat, no swimmer, could live for a minute. The terrific violence of the current was the smallest part of the danger. The main peril lay in the trees and logs whirled along by the mad rush of water; one blow from a heavy butt spinning like a cork along the mad eddies, and boat or swimmer would be beaten under, never to rise again.

An hour passed, and then the Scouts saw the first sign of the weather which had sent this wild flood as its forewarning. Over the northern horizon rose a huge, black bar of storm-cloud. It slowly rose, and from a bar became a wall, from a wall became a curtain; and when it covered the sun, the day became suddenly darkened, though the air was as hot as ever. Then came the rain. It fell with tremendous power, seeming in its tropical fury less like rain than like solid sheets of water falling from the sky. In a trice a hundred little streamlets were pouring from the high ground behind the house and adding their runlets to the main stream. When the boys had finished their dinner and went to look

at the flood, they found a fair-sized creek streaming past the back-door. Behind the house there was a wide and fairly deep depression before the land began to rise to the big ridge beyond, and Mr Barry had chosen the knoll between the depression and the bed of the creek with a view to a dry site in wet weather. On the one hand the water ran away to the creek, and on the other it collected in the depression, from which it was drained by a cutting in a bank at the lower end of the basin-shaped hollow. The cutting was only a narrow one, but it had hitherto been amply sufficient to carry off the water of the heaviest rains they had known at Ballamoola. The depression now looked like a small lake, and the cutting was spouting yellow water in a huge stream.

‘I say, Dick,’ said Jerry, as the boys stared out at the lake, ‘is that hollow a billabong?’

A ‘billabong’ is an arm of a river which runs out of the stream at a certain point and rejoins the river below. Many billabongs only run when there is a flood in the stream; at other times they are dry grassy hollows.

‘Father says it has been one once; but he doesn’t think it is now.’

‘Why not?’ asked Jerry. ‘Does it run round up above into the river?’

‘Yes,’ said Dick; ‘but at the point where it comes out on the bank it’s a good sixty feet above the bed of the creek. Father thinks the shape of the land must have altered since this was a billabong and water was running in it.’

‘There’s a tidy drop gettin’ into it now,’ remarked Jerry.

‘Yes; but that’s only surface-water coming down from the ridge,’ said Dick; ‘that soon clears away.’

Within an hour Dick had to reconsider his words. The surface-water was not clearing away as fast as he had seen it go at other times of heavy rain. The depression began to fill and fill until the lake was within a few yards of the house.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Dick. ‘Is the cutting choked?’

The boys ran down to it, and found the cutting was all right; water was streaming through it with immense power. The rain, too, was as heavy as ever; in running a couple of hundred yards they were soaked to the skin as completely as if they had jumped into the pool.

‘Cutting’s too small,’ said Dick. ‘Jerry, run up to the huts and turn the men out.’

Jerry ran to the black-fellows’ huts, fifty or sixty yards beyond the house, and Dick hurried back to the store beside the main buildings to get tools. His mother came to the door as he approached the house.

‘What’s the matter, Dick?’ she cried. ‘The water from the hollow will be in the house soon!’

‘It can’t get away fast enough at the cutting,’ replied Dick; ‘but I’ll soon alter that.’

He fetched long-handled shovels and a couple of pickaxes from the store, and the next minute up ran Jerry, followed by Jacky, Jemmie, and Pintpot. Arming his followers with the implements, Dick led the way to the drain, and under his directions they began working like beavers to enlarge the opening and prevent the water from flooding the house.

It proved a tremendous struggle, much bigger than any one expected. For the rain came down, if possible, faster than ever, and the ground proved to have an unexpected rib of rock in it. The water increased so fast in the old billabong that it crept into the store-room, where it stood a foot deep; into the back-kitchen, where it was a little deeper; and lipped the upper edge of the steps which led to the living-room, and Mrs Barry hastily removed the best pieces of furniture to a loft. But into the living-room it did not get. Four hours’ hard work and a sudden slackening of the rain saved the situation. The wearied workers leaned on their shovel-handles, and saw with deep satisfaction that the water

was sinking slowly down the stick they had set up as a gauge.

What a sight they were! Plastered from head to foot with mud, dripping and drenched and weary, they stood beside the enlarged cutting and watched the water gush away down the hill, and heard Mrs Barry's cry of pleasure as she saw the yellow flood retreat from the part of the house which it had invaded.

Then she called them to come to the tea she had prepared, and all were glad to drop the shovels from their blistered hands and go to the house, where the biggest tin teapot was filled with the comforting beverage and huge piles of fresh damper were waiting for the hungry workers.

Dick marched across the big kitchen and glanced through the window. He gave a cry of astonishment, which brought Jerry running to his side.

'My word!' said Jerry, and could say no more. It was an extraordinary sight which lay before them. While they had worked in the billabong the main flood had made a marvellous advance. It had long ago topped the bank on the other side of the river, and had spread right across the flat. Between them and the distant ridge lay a vast sea-like expanse of water.

'Just to think,' said Dick, 'that only this morning water was as precious as gold; and now, look at that!'

'Reg'lar old game in the Never-Never,' commented Jerry. 'Either you're dyin' for want o' it, or up to your neck an' well-nigh drowned in it.'

Suddenly the rain stopped—stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and the vast black cloud from which it had fallen went sliding across the sky like a solid roof being moved over. As it went the sinking sun came into view, and the scene was flooded with a wild, yellow glare, under which the strange, wild sea of water looked stranger and wilder still.

‘Oh, thank Heaven, the rain’s stopped!’ murmured Mrs Barry.

‘Very likely it’ll be the one storm and all over,’ said Dick. ‘The creek will begin to run out again. We’ve seen the worst.’

But Dick was wrong again. This was the beginning of a flood which was to upset all expectations, and not one of them dreamt of the awful night which lay before them.

CHAPTER XXX.

A WILD NIGHT.

THE first part of the night passed quietly enough. No more rain came ; the billabong soon emptied itself of surface-water, and the level of the river, when the inmates of Ballamoola retired to rest, was a long way below the spot on which the house stood. The room on the ground-floor where Dick usually slept had been entered by the water during the temporary flood of the afternoon, and everything made very damp ; but there were a couple of wooden bunks built in a lean-to at the end of the house, and here Dick and Jerry took up their quarters for the night. They were weary with the heavy task of the afternoon and were asleep in a trice.

About two in the morning Dick was awakened by a terrific noise. He started up in his bunk and threw aside the blanket in which he was wrapped. The rolling echoes in the distance told him that he had been awakened by a clap of thunder.

‘Storm coming back,’ reflected Dick. ‘How dark it is, and what a row the river’s making!’

The river was on the other side of the house, and it seemed to be pouring along in undiminished fury. Then a fainter, nearer noise came to Dick’s ears. It was a soft, plashing sound as of water bubbling and gurgling quite near at hand.

Dick put his hand on the side of the bunk and was about to climb out, when there came a great flash of lightning. For a second the window of the lean-to was filled with blue light ; then the black darkness fell again.

But in that brief flash Dick had caught sight of a strange,

shining whiteness on the floor of the lean-to, and out he leapt. Splash! his bare feet landed in cold water, ankle-deep.

A roaring crackle of thunder followed the lightning, and in the midst of the crashing sound Dick made one leap to Jerry's bunk and seized his companion's arm. Despite the thunder Jerry still slept soundly, but he woke instantly at a touch.

'Hello!' said Jerry. 'That you, Dick? Anythin' wrong?'

'My Colonial! yes,' replied Dick. 'The flood must have risen tremendously; the water's in the room here.'

'No?' cried Jerry, and made one leap from his bunk. The water into which he dropped showed him that Dick's words were only too true.

'It strikes me, Jerry,' said Dick coolly, 'that your No. 1 flood has arrived with a vengeance. But from which side is it coming in, I wonder; from the river or from the billabong? Let's get into the house; it's a bit higher than this.'

The Scouts had turned in wearing their shirts and trousers in order to be ready if action should be needed, so they had no dressing to trouble about. They splashed across the lean-to, went up three steps, and opened a door leading into the big kitchen. As they went in a light sprang up, and they saw that Mrs Barry was lighting a lamp.

'The thunder wakened me,' she said. 'I've been sleeping in my chair, so I'm getting a light. Is the rain coming back?'

'There's flood enough without the rain, I fancy, mother,' said Dick quietly. 'It's in the lean-to.'

Mrs Barry gave a cry of incredulous wonder, and ran to the door through which the boys had just come, with a lamp in her hand.

'The flood!' she cried. 'In here? Then the billabong's choked again!'

Dick threw open a window which looked on the billabong and thrust out his head. There was a wild sound of rushing water on this side also, and an ugly apprehension crept into his mind. Suddenly there came a tremendous outburst of lightning; it could not be called a flash, for the sky seemed filled by a hundred flashes coming and going in every direction, so that for whole seconds the scene was illuminated as vividly as if a midday sun had broken out.

Jerry was at Dick's shoulder, and the Scouts uttered a cry of amazement. It was an appalling scene which the lightning brought to view. *The billabong was in flood.* Here was no choking up, no temporary pool, but a great stream a quarter of a mile wide, tossing its waves and whirling its freight of logs and wreckage along in the livid glare of the almost incessant lightning.

'The billabong's running!' shouted Dick.

'Running?' repeated Mrs Barry in a tone of incredulous wonder. 'Why, your father said it would never run again in this world. He said no flood could reach it.'

But this flood was upsetting every prediction, falsifying every expectation; it was a flood of tremendous and terrifying power and violence.

'How about the creek side?' said Jerry; and the boys ran to the front-door, which looked directly into the channel, where far below the dry bed had shone white in yesterday's sun.

Jerry was first at the door, and he observed it just as another wild whirl of flashes danced across the sky.

'My word!' gasped Jerry, and could say no more. The water was lapping the lowest of the log slabs which formed a stairway of three steps up to the door. Again the lightning danced, and the boys looked across a vast expanse of wild, heaving water, spreading directly from their feet as if Ballamoola had been built on the very verge of an immense lake.

‘Whew!’ whistled Dick. ‘Ballamoola’s cut off front and back. We’re on an island, Jerry, and a mighty little island at that!’

‘Will the house go?’ cried Mrs Barry.

‘Not just yet, mother,’ replied Dick cheerily. ‘It’s built about as strongly as you can make ’em. Father made no half-job of it.’

‘No, he didn’t,’ said Mrs Barry; ‘the uprights are good, strong mulga posts, and he let them deep into the ground and packed them round with red ant-bed.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Jerry; ‘then they won’t shift in a hurry. That red ant-bed stuff sets just like cement. I don’t reckon Ballamoola’s goin’ to start on a trip down the river just yet.’

‘All hands to the pumps!’ sang out Dick.

‘What’s the idea?’ asked Jerry.

‘Why, we must shift all the tucker and that sort of thing up to the loft,’ replied Dick.

‘Do you think the water’s coming in, Dick?’ cried his mother.

‘It’ll be in this room within the next half-hour by the look of things,’ said Dick; ‘so we’ll prepare for the worst and hope for the best.’

The living-room and sleeping-rooms of the station were all on the ground-floor; but across a great part of the living-room ran a loft, reached by a stairway fixed against a wall. The loft was about ten feet above the floor, and would afford the next refuge when the flood entered the house.

‘What about the men’s huts and the stables?’ cried Jerry.

‘They’re all right yet,’ replied Dick; ‘they’re a trifle higher than the house. We’ll get things as straight as we can here, then begin to think about them.’

Mrs Barry set the lamp on the mantelpiece, and by its light the three of them set to work and toiled up and down the stairway, carrying bags of flour, sugar, meal, a couple of

sides of bacon, salt-meat from the pickle-tub, and other stores, till everything that water could spoil was safely packed away in the loft.

Dick had been working with his eye on the front-door, for he feared the main creek more than the billabong. He was starting up the steps with a bag of ration sugar on his back, when he saw a dark line spread inwards over the ant-bed floor.

'Just in time,' he murmured; 'lucky this is the last bag;' and up he went and dumped it on the loft floor.

'What do you say, Dick?' called out his mother, who was at the other end of the loft.

'Water's coming over the floor, and here's the last bag, mother,' replied Dick.

She came to the edge of the loft, lamp in hand, and Jerry, who had been stacking sacks, joined her, and all three, without saying a word, looked into the dark pool, which had spread with magical swiftness from corner to corner of the room. Then Dick turned and ran to a little window at the far end of the loft. From this he could see the huts and the stables, and he waited till a flash of lightning lit up the scene. He saw that the water was not yet up to the out-buildings, and he saw the forms of Jacky, Jemmie, and Pintpot moving about the stables. But retreat to this point of safety was impossible, and had been impossible for the last couple of hours. Between the house and the men's huts was a deep dip of ground, and a side-current was tearing through this dip at a tremendous pace. Any one attempting to cross the stream would be swept away at once into the main torrent.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LAST REFUGE.

THE water now surrounded the house on every side, and was pouring in at every crevice and rising fast in the kitchen.

With a crash a window went in, and up, up rose the flood, swallowing step after step of the stairway leading to the loft. At last there were only four steps above water. Then the flood paused and stood for half-an-hour. The besieged watched the fourth step with anxious eyes.

‘It’s goin’ back! The water’s fallin’!’ cried Jerry. So it seemed to be for a while; then a great roaring noise was heard up-river. It came to their ears through the loft window, which was open; and Dick muttered, ‘Another fresh; she’ll rise again!’

Dick was right; another freshet was bursting along the furious stream, and up came the water again. The fourth step disappeared.

At this moment the house received a tremendous blow which caused it to rock to its foundations, and almost threw Mrs Barry off her feet.

‘The house is going!’ she cried. ‘It’s going with the flood!’ But the shock passed and the house stood firm, and they drew a deep breath of thankfulness.

‘It was a tree,’ said Dick—‘a tree dashed against us by the flood. But we must get out of this. We might be drowned in this loft like rats in a hole.’

He sprang to a corner, and seized a big felling-axe which lay there. He dealt a dozen heavy blows and beat a hole in the roof, which came down low above their heads.

'I see,' said Jerry. 'Up aloft. Yes; there's nothin' else for it.'

He caught up a second axe, and in a very short time the two Scouts had cut a good-sized hole in the shingled roof.

Through the hole they crept, the two boys assisting Mrs Barry, and all three gained the roof at a point not far below its ridge.

'It strikes me, mother, we've got to stay here a bit,' said Dick cheerily; 'so I'll make you as comfortable as it's possible to make a lady on a house-top.'

Mrs Barry laughed. She was a bushwoman born and bred, and was facing the music as cheerfully as if to be drowned out of house and home was an experience which came every other week, and was to be taken in the ordinary run of things.

'What can you do, Dick?' she said.

'I'll show you in two-tvos,' he answered; and, bidding Jerry lend his mother a hand to keep her steady in her precarious position, he scrambled back through the hole in the loft. In a few moments he reappeared with a hammer and three seven-inch fencing spikes. The latter were driven into the wooden roof in a row, and then Dick fetched a bag of meal and dropped it inside the little fence of spikes. The bag brought up against the spikes and remained firm. The roof was of easy pitch, and the bag afforded a capital seat for Mrs Barry; while the two boys swarmed up to the ridge and sat astride it.

This was the last point of refuge they could gain, and in the next moment it was proved how frail it might be amidst the dangers of this extraordinary night. A great burst of lightning showed an immense gum-tree wallowing in the flood and rolling direct upon them.

'Hold tight, everybody!' roared Dick; and in the darkness which followed they waited with fast-beating hearts for the crash of the huge trunk against the gable-end. It

came. There was a shock which seemed as if it would tear the house from its foundations, yet the stout building stood, and the boys gave a cheer of victory. A second flash showed the great tree sheering away, and they saw that a cross-current had swung it aside, and, fortunately for them, the house had only received a glancing blow; the full charge of that mighty trunk must have swept them away headlong.

‘We must stick to the roof,’ cried Dick. ‘If a tree broke the house from its foundations, the roof might float, and perhaps we’d get ashore somehow. No use to go back to the loft.’

There was a good deal of ‘might’ and ‘perhaps’ in this, and all of them felt it; but there was no other view to be taken of their desperate situation, and all agreed that the roof was the only place, and strained their eyes eastwards to catch the first glimpse of dawn.

Suddenly, as if to put a climax to their trials, the rain burst upon them again—burst with the fury of a waterspout. Within five seconds water was streaming from every thread of their clothing, and as if in sympathy with the pouring rain the lightning flashed across the sky with redoubled violence, so that the flashes were almost incessant; and the thunder, in deafening, crackling peals, rolled and rolled absolutely without pause; and the foaming, roaring flood added a deep, awful note of impending destruction to the dreadful chorus. Drenched with rain, deafened with these frightful noises, blinded by lightning, the boys and Mrs Barry spent the last hour before the dawn; and when a murky, gray light crept across the wild waste of waters they hailed it gladly, thankful that another dawn found them alive, though in so desperate a strait.

As the light grew Dick crept to the edge of the hole leading down to the loft and peered in. He gave a shout of joy. ‘Here’s luck!’ he cried; ‘the water isn’t in the loft after all. It’s just on the edge of it, but the floor’s

dry yet. Come on, mother; I'll help you down there. Now it's daylight we can keep watch and warn you if any danger comes in sight.'

Mrs Barry went down into the loft, and Dick returned to his perch on the roof.

'The men's huts are under water,' cried Jerry, 'and only the top o' the stables is standin' out.'

'Yes; but there are the boys, and Whitesock and Dandy are with 'em. Good! good!' cried Dick, and pointed to a tiny rise where the blacks and the horses were clustered on the highest point of the ridge, a tiny strip of land yet unswallowed by the flood.

'My word, Dick!' murmured Jerry, 'this is a dead-finish, this flood is. If it rises a few feet more we shall be done for; the water will be over the top o' everythin'.'

'We shall have to try to make a raft,' said Dick.

'A jolly poor look out that,' replied Jerry; 'we should be carried into the stream, an' things would bang an' bang into us, an' it would be all over in no time. Still, if it comes to that, we'll have a shot at it an' do what we can.'

'Hallo!' said Dick; 'here's a big old joker coming our way. I hope it'll pass by without troubling to call.' Dick pointed to an uprooted bottle-tree bobbing along on the flood and sailing straight for the house. It had a most comical appearance as it dipped and rose on its huge, bulbous stem, for now its tangle of roots popped above water, and then its tangle of branches. But there would be nothing comical if it carried away the house with its heavy trunk, and the Scouts watched it anxiously.

Suddenly Dick scrambled quickly along the roof and plunged into a quiet eddy formed under shelter of the farther gable. Here was a floating raffle of odds and ends, sticks and brushwood, which had come down the stream. Among these was a bar of a fence, a piece of straight timber four inches square and seven or eight feet long. Dick had

marked this bar, and having salvaged it, he regained the roof and dragged it with him to the point where danger threatened. His aim was to thrust the trunk aside if it sheered in towards the roof.

Down came the bottle-tree, dancing on the current, and Dick poised his bar for a push. But the tree worked out a little, and Jerry sang out, 'He'll go by this time.'

But no; he did nothing of the kind. A big hooked root, thrown out like a sort of grapnel, caught under the projection of the roof beyond the wall, and the big bottle-tree thus became anchored to the building.

Slowly the great bulbous stem swung round with the rushing stream, and crash! it came against the eaves, smashing and splintering the shingles against which it was driven.

'Shove her off, Dick!' shouted Jerry, as the building shook under the repeated blows dealt by the great tree swinging with the current, and Dick thrust his bar against the fanged root and tried to work it loose. In vain; the tree was far too heavy for him to shift.

'Pass up an' axe, Jerry—an axe, quick!' cried Dick—'and I'll cut the root through.'

Mrs Barry thrust an axe through the hole in the roof. Jerry seized it and climbed nimbly along the ridge. In a trice it was in Dick's hands, and he began to hew fiercely at the root. Luckily the edge was keen and Dick was a first-rate axeman, and the chips began to fly thick and fast. With a last swinging blow the root was severed and the tree began slowly to move off on the stream. As it did so the boys had to hold on tight to the ridge or they would have been carried away with it. For the huge bushy top now overhung the roof, and as the trunk rolled away the branches swept the ridge like a great besom. But just as the mass of twigs rolled clear of the Scouts there was a loud thud, and some heavy body fell on the roof.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BOA-CONSTRUCTOR.

JERRY let out a yell of horror, and Dick raised his head to look. It was no wonder that Jerry shouted, for out of the tree had sprung or fallen a huge rock-python, the big snake of Australia, and it was now squirming its vast coils across the ridge, within six feet of Jerry's body. It had taken refuge from the flood in the tree—perhaps the tree, if hollow, had been its home—and was now hastening to leave its floating ark for the more solid house-top.

Jerry drew back and poised the bar—for he had taken it from Dick—but did not strike for the moment.

‘Wait a bit,’ whispered Dick quickly. ‘Keep still! We won’t anger the brute unless we’re forced to. We’ll soon see if he means mischief.’

If the monster did mean mischief, he was certainly very capable of doing it. The great boa-constructor was fully fifteen feet long, and its huge coils, with their markings of black, buff, and orange, glittered in the morning light with the shine of polished agate.

The boys kept perfectly still, for they knew snakes and their ways, and watched the great and terrible creature. It seemed to find satisfaction in gaining something firm on which to rest its body, and it leisurely folded itself up on the ridge, and then leant its broad head on the topmost coil, its eyes fixed full on Jerry. The sight of the boy seemed to arouse the python for a moment. It raised its head a couple of feet, and opened its flat, wide jaws, and seemed to be about to spring.

Jerry clutched the bar, but kept quite still. For a few

frightful seconds they thus faced each other, Scout and snake; and Dick breathed, 'Keep still! Keep still!' For he had noticed a huge lump in the snake's body where a coil was stretched, as it seemed, almost to bursting.

Jerry held his place without a quiver, though his blood ran cold within him as the gaping jaws hovered in the air, and he expected at every moment that the great head would be dashed at him with stunning force, to be followed by the winding, strangling coils. Then, to his immense relief, the threatened danger was averted for the moment. The great boa-constructor, as if satisfied by the immobility of the figure before it, dropped its head on its coils, though its eyes, with cold, dreadful, unwinking stare, were fixed full on Jerry.

'Gorged,' breathed Dick; 'look at the lump. Wait till it sleeps; then the axe.'

Jerry saw the lump, and breathed a little easier. The python had lately swallowed some good-sized animal, probably a kangaroo, and was now digesting its meal. In this state it would lose a great part of its natural activity and easily fall into a kind of torpor. If only it would sleep; then a stroke of the keen, heavy axe-head might easily bring them deliverance.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed, each minute seeming like an hour to the waiting Scouts, and the great snake appeared to be sinking into deeper and deeper repose, when, alas! a cheerful voice rang out from the loft.

'Dick! Jerry!' it called. 'The flood's going down. Come and look! It's inches lower within the last half-hour.'

The boys groaned below their breath. They did not dare to answer the call. The boa-constructor lay between them and the hole in the roof, and any movement or sound on their part might bring upon them an instant attack.



He shot out his hands and took a convulsive grip of the narrow throat.
L.P.

At the next moment Mrs Barry's head appeared through the hole. Wondering why the boys made no reply, she had come to see where they were. She could not repress a cry of surprise and alarm, and this cry roused the python. Again it flung up its head, and this time it looked towards the spot whence the cry had come. Mrs Barry sprang back into the loft; the boys waited anxiously to see the great reptile settle down once more amid its coils. But no. It saw the hole, and the hole attracted it. A hole in a rock or a tree is its favourite lurking-place during the process of digesting its meal, and the python slowly unfolded its coils and began lazily to glide across the roof towards the loft, where Mrs Barry was penned up, unable to fly a single step from the monster.

The Scouts swung into action at once. Up sprang Jerry, balancing himself on the ridge and poising the heavy bar. 'No road that way!' he sang out, and dropped the bar with all his might across the python's neck. The huge snake turned with a savage hiss of anger, and shot its head with a tremendous butting-blow straight at Jerry. The blow swept Jerry's feet from under him and sent him spinning off the house-top into the flood, and he disappeared beneath the yellow water. Such was the force of the python's attack that the huge reptile wholly uncoiled itself and was stretched out across the ridge, half its length on the one side, half on the other. As it swung round to recover itself Dick made a tremendous chop at it with the axe. He aimed at cutting its backbone through, and the axe sank deeply into the round, heaving body, carving a huge wound, from which the blood flowed in great spurts. The boa-constructor whirled round, tearing the axe from Dick's hands, and flung itself upon the boy. With marvellous swiftness it threw a couple of coils about his body, and its head swung up to strike. Luckily Dick had thrown up his hands, and his arms were free. He shot out his hands and

took a convulsive grip of the narrow throat, just below the horrid, gaping mouth, and held it off for the moment with the strength of despair.

But Dick's utmost strength could not have availed him for a moment had he not got in that lucky first blow, and dealt a wound which had almost disabled the huge reptile. As it was, Dick thought it was all over with him. The great folds tightened upon him till he felt as if every rib was cracking under the frightful pressure, and he knew that his grip on the cold, horrid, scaly neck was weakening, when there was a sudden flash of steel, and again the axe was driven home, not six inches below Dick's hands, into the arched and quivering neck.

Jerry had come to the rescue. He had risen from his ducking, clambered swiftly up the roof again, seized the axe, and dealt a blow which finished the fight.

Down dropped Dick and the python, still lashed in that frightful embrace; but in a trice Jerry hooked his hands under Dick's arms and dragged his friend free, while the dying snake rolled along the roof and was lost to sight in the tawny stream.

'Anything gone, old chap?' said Jerry anxiously as Dick drew his first free, long breath.

'No, I think not,' replied the other. 'I fancy my ribs are sound yet, thanks to you, Jerry. My Colonial! that was a hug, if you like. If I hadn't got in first chop he'd have mashed me into a jelly in no time.'

At this moment Mrs Barry's voice came from below. 'Has the snake gone?' she said. The struggle had been waged in grim and deadly silence, so that she had known nothing of it.

'Yes, Mrs Barry,' sang out Jerry cheerfully. 'It's gone down-stream in three bits; we got in a chop apiece and settled its hash.'

'That's a good job,' said Mrs Barry.

The Scouts grinned at each other and rather fancied that, taking it all round, it was a good job.

‘I’ve got some breakfast ready,’ cried Mrs Barry; ‘you’d better come down and have it.’

Dick and Jerry were quite willing, and down they went to the loft. Here they were cheered not only by food, but by the sight of a step of the stairs emerging to view from the flood, and next by the sun breaking out and sending shafts of strong, hot sunshine through the hole above their heads.

When breakfast was over they resumed their vigil on the roof; but no more drifting trees came their way, and patience was the thing called for as they watched the waters recede inch by inch.

After midday the flood took a decided turn, and began to fall as swiftly as it had risen.

‘It’s running out from the hills,’ said Dick. ‘We shall see dry land soon.’

By four o’clock the house was empty, and the boys were able to splash waist-deep across the dip and up to the ridge where the blackboys and horses were, and see for themselves that Whitesock and Dandy were safe and sound. Jacky, Jemmie, and Pintpot returned with them, and all hands set to work to clean out the homestead and make it habitable once more.

This kept them busy until darkness had fallen. But the night passed in quietness, and they rose to find that the billabong had run out, and once more they were bounded by dry land on that side. On the other the river was still tremendous, and the flat one vast lake.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WILD HORSES.

IT took three days for the flat to empty out into the creek-bed, and within a few days more the change was marvellous. The brown, burnt, desolate plain blossomed into a luxuriant meadow, rich with sweet grasses and brilliant with lovely flowers. Pityable it was indeed to think that the cattle who should have been revelling in that glorious wealth of water and herbage had lain down to die of thirst and famine in the last days of the long, weary drought.

One morning Dick glanced over the flat, and saw, to his great surprise, that a bunch of horses was feeding below the distant ridge. He and Jerry rode across to look at them, thinking they were perhaps strays from Narana.

But no; it was a small mob of brumbies (wild horses), led by a big brown stallion. As a rule, brumbies are shot down mercilessly when they trespass on a run; they are regarded as intruders, taking food and water from the rightful stock. But Dick made no attempt to interfere with the mob; it was but small, and besides, worse luck, there was no stock to be robbed at Ballamoola.

The boys put their horses to a gallop, and chased the brumbies for a mile or so to see of what quality they were. They were nine in number, the stallion, lord of the mob, five mares, and three foals. The mares were poor, weedy things, save a compact, well-knit gray, a very handsome creature.

‘The gray’s all right,’ remarked Jerry.

‘Yes; and she’s no brumby,’ cried Dick. ‘See how she moves! She’s known a saddle.’

‘You’re right,’ said Jerry. ‘She’s a runaway, but from no station about here.’

‘Might have come a hundred miles,’ said Dick ; and Jerry nodded.

It is a very common thing for brumbies to entice a station-mare to leave her home, and this is another reason why the wild horses are shot down on sight. The boys put White-sock and Dandy to full speed and headed off the brumbies closely enough to satisfy themselves that the gray mare was something beyond ordinary, and had worn a saddle within the last three months. Then they drew rein, and permitted the brumbies to scour away up the flanks of the ridge.

Some weeks now slipped on, during which the boys and the blacks were kept busy repairing the damages of the flood. For one thing, the kitchen-garden had been swept completely away—trees, fences, plants, everything. The spot where it had stood was a smooth, bare stretch of yellow soil, and the whole of the work had to be done again, just as when the homestead was first laid out. Then the yards had suffered severely, and there was a busy time of cutting posts and rails and getting things into order, ready for the time when they hoped that stock would be running on Ballamoola once more.

But what of the men who had gone out in search of the wherewithal to purchase the stock? Not a word came of the prospectors, and the time of their promised return was long past. There was nothing much to worry about in this, for when men start on a trip Out Back the time of their return must always be a very uncertain affair. They may be detained in a hundred ways ; they may be drawn on and on by accounts of a new rush somewhere, and months slip by and they are still marching forward in pursuit of that will-o'-the-wisp—Fortune.

Then there came a very disconcerting piece of news. It came from the distant township, and had been brought there by the blacksmith's son, Tom Hale, who had been drawn from home by the same report that had caused Mr Barry

and his mate to set out. It was to the effect that a terrible attack of fever had broken out in the mining-camp, and had swept through almost every tent and shanty; that both Barry and McLean had been struck down. But Tom could not say whether they recovered or died.

The news came from the McLeans, and at once, upon hearing it, Mrs Barry borrowed Dandy from Jerry, and with Dick on Whitesock rode to the township to see Tom. They gained no fresh particulars. The first bald report was the whole that Tom could say. Nor had he come straight from the camp. He had followed a new rush, and it was many weeks since he had left the fever-stricken gully, where men were dying every day.

This news put Mrs Barry into a state of very deep anxiety, and it was in vain that Dick tried to comfort her.

‘They’ve both been down with fever before,’ he said; ‘they’ll pull through all right. They know what to do with themselves, and father took plenty of quinine with him.’

‘But we’ve heard nothing,’ replied his mother, ‘and it’s a long time since Tom left the camp. Surely your father would have given a letter to some one coming south to let us know how he was getting on.’

Dick was silent, for he knew not what to say. He reflected for a time, then gave a quick nod of the head. He had decided on his line of action.

‘I’ll go and see what’s the matter,’ he said.

‘You, Dick?’ cried his mother.

‘Who else is there to go, mother?’ replied Dick. ‘And somebody ought to do it. Father may want a hand at this minute; and I’ll go bail, if he’s on his back with the fever somewhere, he’d be glad to see me and Jerry turning up to see what we could do.’

Mrs Barry was silent. Dick was only a boy, but away Out Back a boy often has to tackle a man’s job; and, as Dick said, who was to go if he didn’t?

That evening Dick mustered the Lone Patrol in the store and laid the situation before them. Jerry was enthusiastic for the venture, and Jacky merely said, 'Mine thinkit trot with Whitesock,' for there was no third horse about the station.

'No,' said Dick; 'there's no need for you to go on the wallaby, Jacky. We'll collar that gray that's running with the brumbies.'

'Great idea,' cried Jerry. 'I saw 'em yesterday on the far side o' the ridge. They lie up there in a patch o' mulga scrub, an' come out to feed.'

'All right,' said Dick; 'then the Kangaroos muster at three o'clock to-morrow morning.'

Long before the first peep of the next dawn the three Scouts were on their way, Dick and Jerry riding at the gentlest of canters, and Jacky trotting alongside. The riders were saving their mounts carefully; there might be a tremendous race before they secured the hoped-for prize, and, again, she might prove altogether too swift for them. They had noted her long, easy, raking stride, and she would carry no weight.

They crossed the flat and dismounted at the foot of the ridge. They walked up the slope, leading the horses, and paused just before the summit was gained. Jacky was now left in charge of Whitesock and Dandy, while Dick and Jerry went ahead to look over the ground.

As they peered out from the top of the ridge the eastern sky began to show a faint pink, and the plain came dimly into view. The light grew, and they made out the patch of mulga scrub, a dark island on the sea of verdure.

'There they are! There they are!' breathed Jerry, and shot out a forefinger. Yes; the brumbies were already leaving their covert and beginning to browse leisurely on the rich pasture. Now for the wild race and the hoped-for capture!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE CAPTURE OF THE GRAY MARE.

NOW that the boys knew where for a certainty the wild horses were feeding, they slipped back to the spot where Jacky had been left, and held a council of war.

‘We mustn’t let them get away westwards,’ said Dick. ‘There’s good galloping-ground for thirty miles that way, and the gray might run clean away from us. We’ll edge ’em north-east and get ’em into Box Tree Gully; it’s as good as a yard.’

The morning breeze was now stirring lightly round them, and Dick wetted a finger and held it up.

‘The breeze is sou’-west,’ he remarked; ‘that’s useful;’ and he gave some directions to Jacky, who trotted away at once along the ridge and disappeared. Then Dick and Jerry took their horses by the bridle, and moved slowly on foot over a saddle of the ridge and down the slope to the plain where the wild horses were feeding. As the boys went they kept very carefully in cover of the horses, and now Whitesock and Dandy were held at the full length of the reins, so that they were able to put down their heads and crop the long grass. This gave them the air of horses quietly grazing, and so long as the brumbies could not catch the scent of the boys they would remain quiet, thinking that these horses were stragglers from some other mob.

Yard by yard the Scouts worked up, and it was with deep satisfaction that Dick marked the gray mare drinking heartily at a water-hole on the edge of the scrub.

‘Capital,’ thought Dick. ‘Lap away, my lady; a jolly

good fill of cold water won't be any help to your speed this morning.'

Suddenly a loud, whistling, snorting scream rang across the plain. It had been given by the big brown stallion, and there he stood, stamping angrily, head up, nostrils opened wide, his whole appearance one of fear and suspicion. But he was not looking towards the on-creeping Scouts. His head was turned to the south-west, to the point where the plain opened out, and he snuffed in the air a scent which he feared. It was the scent of Jacky, who had placed himself down wind, between the mob and the open.

Again the stallion snorted and stamped, and his head was turned quickly from side to side. He could see no enemy; but his wonderful power of scent told him that danger lurked among the patches of scrub to the south-west, and he wheeled round with a loud snort and was off.

From the moment the stallion began to show signs of excitement the rest of the mob threw up their heads and waited; to him was left the lead. But no sooner did he wheel round and break into a wild gallop than all sprang out in his wake, and the mob went racing at full speed up the flat. They passed within three hundred yards of Dick and Jerry, who kept themselves carefully hidden till the brumbies were gone by lest the wild horses should be headed back. Then up sprang the Scouts, and Whitesock and Dandy, who knew well what game was afoot, were at full speed almost before their riders were settled in the saddle.

Dick, being on the faster horse, galloped across the rear of the flying mob; Jerry kept on the side, and soon there was a rider on each flank of the band of wild horses.

Box Tree Gully was five miles ahead, and before it would be reached there were plenty of gaps in the ridge where horses could escape, so the riders hung closely on the flanks of the mob ready to head any break-away on either side.

At the rear of the mob was a black mare with a young foal. She soon began to show signs of distress, and suddenly swerved away on Jerry's side.

'Let her go!' roared Dick; and Jerry nodded. She was not wanted, and was allowed to slip away with her little brown colt. Within the next mile two more mares flagged and were passed, and then another, and next the two older colts. These were in no condition to hold their own against Whitesock and Dandy.

Half-starved before the rains and full-fed since, they were a mass of lather and foam and could not hope to escape. But galloping ahead, keeping a tremendous speed with the appearance of no effort, were the big stallion and the handsome gray mare, and the eyes of the Scouts were fixed on the latter, a prize well worth winning.

Suddenly the stallion made a dash for freedom from those hoofs beating so steadily in his rear. He made his effort as he passed a clump of timber set directly in their path. Dick checked Whitesock, wheeled him, and galloped madly back and round the clump, divining the big horse's trick. He was perfectly right. The stallion had swung right round the clump and was racing back towards the mares left behind. But he was met full by Dick, waving his hat and cracking his stock-whip, while the reins hung on Whitesock's neck. This was too much for the brumby. He swung round on his haunches and continued his flight.

On and on they went, and Dick and Jerry pressed closer still upon the fugitives, cracking their whips and shouting to make the pace hotter still. They wished to pump the mare and cause her to fall behind the stallion; but she dashed forward with wonderful pluck, and hung most stubbornly on his quarters. But she was feeling the gruelling gallop, feeling it cruelly, for the couple or three gallons of cold water she had taken just before starting was

no aid either to wind or pace, and she was streaming with sweat.

Now the mouth of the gully came in sight, or rather the big box-tree which marked its entrance and gave it its name, and Jerry looked to Dick for orders. With a gesture of his hand Dick bade his companion fall squarely behind the galloping pair, while he put Whitesock to full speed and rode round them. His aim was to wheel them just at the mouth of the gully. Then with his pressure on the right front and Jerry driving in the rear, he hoped to send them with a left turn into the gully.

The manœuvre was cleverly executed, but it really required a third rider to fill in the gap which of necessity was left open between the two Scouts. The big stallion flashed his wild eyes round, saw the gap, whirled round with lightning swiftness, and scoured back, followed by the mare. Jerry was by far the nearest, and rode like mad to cut them off; but the terrified beasts seemed to gain a new strength and swiftness at sight of this avenue of escape, and got past Dandy and went whirling down the flat on the back track.

Hard luck to lose them thus just when success seemed certain; but it is all in the game, and the boys rode with all their might on the heels of the runaways, striving to pass them, head them, and turn them back.

But it was Jacky, following up the run on foot, who checked them after all. The chase was heading for a strip of open between two thick patches of scrub, when the black-boy suddenly appeared in the gap. He had stripped off his red Crimean shirt and was waving it in the air, as he leapt high from the ground and uttered the most frightful war-whoops.

Dick and Jerry gave a yell of delight and split at once, galloping right and left to give the horses room to come back. Back they came, terrified at this new and unexpected

obstacle in their path, and Whitesock and Dandy closed upon them from either side, and up they went at a tearing pace towards the gully.

But now the stallion began to draw away, and the Scouts let him go, and hung on the mare and pressed her closely as she began to flag a little. So riding, they came up to the mouth of the gully once more, and now Dick drove Whitesock alongside and cracked his whip in the gray mare's face. She swerved, and Jerry fetched her a stinging cut across her quarters. Dick swung round on the farther side, and the two whips hissed over her back. She bolted straight forward up the gully, for there was no other line open to her, and the Scouts drew rein and breathed their panting steeds, and made their whips crack like a fusillade of pistol-shots in token of their victory.

They waited in the mouth of the gully until Jacky came trotting up, and made use of the time to refresh Whitesock and Dandy, who had played their parts so nobly in the chase. The girths were loosened and the animals placed head on to the pleasant breeze, and they soon recovered their wind and began to pick a mouthful or two of grass.

When Jacky came up the Kangaroos walked gently up the gully in search of the gray mare. They knew she could not go far, for within half a mile the glen came to a dead-stop against a cliff-wall, and the sides were too rough for a horse to climb. They found the mare, blown and panting, standing below a gidyah-tree. Jerry at once began to unfasten a rope which hung at his saddle-D, for the Scouts intended to rope her and throw her, and then put on a spare bridle which they had brought. Dick went forward to look at her.

He glanced over his shoulder. 'Easy with that rope, Jerry,' he said. 'We sha'n't want it here.—Jacky, bring me the bridle. I'll go bail, if I can once get it on her she'll be as quiet as a lamb.'

'She ain't an outlaw, then?' cried Jerry.

'Outlaw?' said Dick. 'Not a bit of it. She's been 'ticed away from home by that old stallion, as many a good station-mare is, and she's only a bit wild from running loose.'

Jacky brought up the bridle, placed it in Dick's hand, and drew back. And now the leader of the Lone Patrol showed how good a horse-master he was. He advanced upon the mare very, very slowly and quietly, and spoke to her in a gentle and soothing tone, to which she responded by pricking her ears, an excellent sign, for there was no hint of laying them back. Soon Dick was rubbing her nose lightly with one hand, the bridle held behind him in the other. Inch by inch he worked up her nose until he took a firm grip of her tangled forelock, and then she was his in a flash. For with equal swiftness and gentleness, he drew the bit against her lips and slipped the headpiece over her ears.

Her mouth opened automatically, as the mouth of a well-broken horse always does, and the bit slid into place. Dick whipped the throat-lash round and slipped it into the buckle; the mare was secured.

Ah! the magic of the bridle. The feel of the tiny bar of iron in her mouth, the grip of the leathern bands about her head, made a marvellous difference in the gray mare. Upon the moment she lost her wild air. She raised her head; she carried herself differently in every line of her body; she was once again the friend and servant of man.

Dick's companions came up and patted and caressed her, and she took their attentions as amiably as if she had just come up to the paddock-rails to attract attention and beg for some tit-bit.

'She's a daisy,' cried Dick, 'and we'll call her Gray Girl;' and so she was named on the spot.

Jerry opened her mouth and glanced in.

‘Six off,’ he remarked, ‘an’ that’s a sweet age. I reckon she’s been just about worth this bit of a run.’

‘Rather,’ said Dick ; ‘and we haven’t been so long about it either.—Up with you, Jacky.—Now we ’ll be getting back towards Ballamoola.’

Up went Jacky, for saddle or bare back was all one to him, and the three moved at a foot-pace down the gully, and did not break into a trot till their captive had recovered some of the breath which had been bustled out of her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MARCH OF THE LONE PATROL.

TWO days later, on a red, roasting morning, the Lone Patrol rode away from Ballamoola and headed north-west for the Bunya River mining-camp. They were not making for the point where Sergeant Blake had been stuck up, but keeping a good three points away to the north, for the Bunya River was a big district, and the mining-camp lay at a point far distant from the corroboree-ground of the Bunya River blacks.

Dick and his companions had been busy every moment since their return to the station with the gray mare, and had left things at Ballamoola as ship-shape as possible. The previous day Dick had driven his mother over to Narana, where the Weirs were delighted that she should stay with them till Dick returned with his father or news of him. The homestead was closed, the doors nailed up—for there was not a lock about the station—and placed in charge of Jemmie and Pintpot, who were supplied with ample rations. With not a single head of live-stock left about the station, it was simple enough for the two old blacks to see to things, for their only work would be to cook their food and see that no mischief was done about the place by any casual passer-by.

Of rations there was plenty; of money there was not a single stiver. The last money in the hands of the Barrys had gone in paying some small debts at the store and fitting out Mr Barry with things needed for his prospecting trip. Neither Dick nor his mother could rake up a penny between them, nor had Jerry so much as a farthing. At both stations it was, as Jerry said, 'a clean bust.' So the Kangaroos had

to fit themselves out from the stores left at Ballamoola and make the best of it. Each Scout carried blankets, a bag of flour, a billy, and a water-bag; and the billies were stuffed with smaller tucker-bags containing tea, sugar, salt, and baking-powder. There was plenty of salt-beef left in the pickling-tub, but Dick decided against it; they could pick up their meat on the road by hunting, for after the rains all kinds of wild creatures would be drawn to the grass; and there were fish in the pools.

As regards weapons, they were very badly provided, and this was a matter of some concern when the character of the Bunya River blacks was taken into account. Mr Barry had taken his revolver and Winchester rifle, and the only fire-arm left at Ballamoola was an ancient smooth-bore shot-gun, a double-barrelled 14-bore—old, but as sound as the day it was built. Many a good day among the ducks and wild swans had Dick had with it when there was water in the creek. There was a two-pound tin of Curtis & Harvey's best diamond powder in stock, and seven or eight pounds of No. 4 shot. Dick wrapped the powder-tin in a piece of oil-cloth and stowed it at the very bottom of his billy to guard against any chance of damp, and that was the whole extent of their provision for shooting. Each Scout carried a knife and a tomahawk, and that completed their outfit of offensive and defensive weapons.

'I wish we'd got that police carbine you bagged off the yellow nigger, Dick,' said Jerry.

'Ah!' said Dick. 'Sergeant Blake took it back to headquarters with him; it belonged to the police of course. And then, if we'd got it, it would be no use without cartridges, and we haven't got a copper to buy one. While this old joker'—and Dick slapped the stock of the fowling-piece—'only wants powder-and-lead stuffing down it, with a bit of newspaper for wadding, and it'll do us a lot of service.'

For the first day's journey Dick was aiming at reaching a lagoon on the head-waters of their own creek, rather more than thirty miles from Ballamoola. This was not a long day's journey, but enough, to begin with, for the gray mare. She was more than a trifle soft, but she would soon harden up, and promised to be as good a goer as Dandy and not far behind Whitesock. The Kangaroos were well mounted, and that was the chief thing of all, for it meant that where they could not fight they could fly.

The day's travel passed quietly. Hour after hour they moved on, pushing over the country at an easy pace and doing their journey all in one piece. Dick did not believe in a halt in the middle of the day.

'What's the use of it?' he said. 'The horses no sooner scatter about in search of a feed than you've got to get 'em together again and start off. Now if your day's march is behind you, they've got a matter of twelve to fourteen hours to get a good feed and a rest; and besides, we're only going to get tucker twice a day, breakfast and supper, so there's no use pulling up;' and the rest of the Lone Patrol listened in silence to these words of wisdom, and nodded agreement.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when the Scouts rode in sight of the lagoon they sought, and drew rein under a clump of silver-box trees to look over the ground. They had no wish to run on an encampment of blacks, and if the slightest trace of fires could be seen they would take a sweep round and hit the creek higher up. All seemed quiet; but to make quite certain, Jacky slipped out of the saddle, gave the reins of the gray to Jerry, and vanished into the low scrub fringing the lagoon with movements as silent as those of his own shadow. In fifteen minutes he was back.

'Mine thinkit no warrigal bin there long time now,' he said. 'Old fires there, but not new; very old.'

The Scouts rode on and saw traces of old encampments

along the bank ; but, as Jacky had said, the fires had been built a long time ago.

They pitched their camp on a small flat near the head of the lagoon—a flat so deep in luxuriant river grass that it was certain the horses would not stray far ; though for safety the animals were hobbled before they were turned loose. Jacky began to build fires and cut boughs for beds, and Dick took out powder and shot.

‘There ought to be ducks somewhere along this bit of water,’ he said. ‘I’ll load one barrel and try my luck.’

‘Why not both?’ asked Jerry.

‘Can’t afford it,’ said Dick. ‘We’ve got to be jolly careful with the bit of stuff in hand.’

‘Which barrel?’ said Jerry. ‘Choke or cylinder?’

‘Cylinder,’ replied Dick ; ‘there’s more scatteration to it if you let fly into the thick of a bunch as they rise.’

‘All right,’ said Jerry. ‘I’m cook, an’ while you’re gone I’ll hit up some Johnny-cakes.’ He took his tomahawk, and marched across to a good-sized silver-box thirty yards away and cut a neat sheet of bark from the trunk. This was his kneading-board ; and turning the smooth, moist, sappy side up, he began to work his flour, water, and baking-powder into a firm dough. Jerry was a dab-hand at Johnny-cakes, and Jacky saw that the fire was right, and before long a little heap of the crisp, warm cakes was piled in the lid of a billy, ready for despatch down hungry throats.

In the meantime Dick had crept quietly round a turn of the lagoon where the water beyond was hidden by a growth of tall rushes. Parting the rushes with the barrel of his gun, he peeped at the pool beyond. He saw nothing for the moment ; then a fat black duck sailed out of the reedy corner, turned another rushy point, and disappeared. Dick’s hungry mouth watered. Black duck was very good indeed, and he crept on more cautiously still, especially as a chorus of quacking now arose from beyond the point.

He cleared it, and saw before him a small arm of the lagoon simply swarming with ducks. There was no need for caution in face of this mass of wild-fowl, and he let out a yell to fetch them up. Up they rose with a loud whirring of wings and a wild commotion of squawking and quacking. He let them go a good forty yards, for he was charged with No. 4 pellets, and the old gun shot like a little cannon and was a wonderfully hard hitter. Then he let fly into the thick of them and dropped four—three on land and one on water. He was securing the three within his reach, when Jacky raced up to see what luck. The blackboy at once whipped off shirt and trousers and swam out and retrieved the fourth, and back they went to the camp in triumph.

A couple of ducks were at once plucked, and Dick broiled one while Jerry made the tea. The other duck fell to Jacky, and his cooking was of the simplest nature. He had his own fire, and he threw the duck upon it, warmed it through, then ate it up to the last scrap of flesh. Beside the other fire sat Dick and Jerry, and made a first-rate supper in the greatest comfort—broiled duck, Johnny-cakes, a billy of tea apiece. It was a supper fit for a king, and they cleared the bush-dish to the last crumb. What is a bush-dish? It is a neat square of clean bark cut from the handiest tree, and you can have a fresh one for each meal and put the old one in the fire.

After supper the three Scouts sat by the fire chatting for a time, while the stars came out in the sky and the soft, warm night fell over the sun-baked land. Then they rolled themselves in their blankets and turned in on the couches of branch-tips which Jacky had built with native skill.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DRY STRETCH.

DICK and Jerry went off to sleep with the utmost composure ; there might be warrigals in the country or there might not. If there were not, there was no need to worry ; if there were, Jacky would know of it and warn them in time. A blackboy in a country where an enemy may possibly turn up is a marvel of vigilance. He may seem to be no more than a motionless heap, head tucked under blanket like a bird's head under its wing ; but let the faintest, the most distant unusual sound be heard, and he is up and alert, his glittering eyes staring, his ears strained, and so he remains until he is satisfied of the nature of the noise which disturbed him.

The night passed quietly ; and just as the morning star was growing wan Dick turned in his blanket and sat up. The air was fresh and cool and the eastern sky was filling with light. The fire was a heap of white ashes, but there were red embers beneath, and Dick got up and tossed on some fresh sticks. The fragrant smoke rose in a moment ; and as Dick moved about, Jerry woke and sat up and yawned. Jacky was already on the move and going towards the horses to see that all was right with them.

'Well, boss,' said Jerry, 'do I rig up the other ducks for breakfast?'

'No ; I don't think so, Jerry,' replied the patrol-leader. 'I fancy we shall want 'em to-night. I'll see if I can get some fish for breakfast. There ought to be some in a pool this size.'

'All right,' said Jerry, 'an' I'll knock up a damper.'

Dick had a fishing-line and some hooks in his swag and

he turned them out, and the two Scouts went down to the lagoon and stripped for a morning dip. But Dick had more in mind than a pleasant swim, and he dived here and there till he found what he sought, a bed of river-mussels. He brought up a good handful of these and tossed them on the bank ; he was now provided with bait.

They dressed, and Jerry went back to the camp to make ready the damper and the tea, while Dick strolled along the bank of the lagoon, baiting his hook as he went and keeping his eye open for a likely-looking hole.

‘That’s the spot,’ murmured Dick to himself as he saw a deep, dark circle of water edged by rushes and shadowed by a thick turpentine-bush. Under cover of the bush, he quietly threw in his bait and began to work it round the hole. The fish were there all right. Within twenty seconds there was a sharp tug, and Dick tugged back and hauled out a good perch. Within five minutes he had three more, ample for a good feed ; so he coiled up his line, stringing his fish by the gills on a forked branch, and went back to the camp, where Jacky broiled them on the wood embers, while Jerry made ready the other part of the meal.

‘What’s the line to-day?’ asked Jerry as they sat at their excellent breakfast. ‘I’m clean out of my country this way.’

‘It’s a dry stretch,’ replied Dick, ‘and we’ll only hit a soak to-night.’

Dick meant that they had now to cross a waterless country, and at night could only hope to obtain water from a shallow, sandy well.

‘Do we do a perish?’ asked Jerry, meaning a journey on which man and beast suffer severely from thirst.

‘Oh no,’ replied Dick ; ‘it’s no more than thirty miles all out—that is, if there’s water in the soak.’

After breakfast they carefully filled their water-bags, each bag holding one and a half gallons, watered the horses well,

and then entered on the dry stretch. It proved worthy of the name. Five miles after leaving the lagoon they came to spinifex-country, and saw that here the drought still reigned, that not a drop of the storm-water had come in this direction.

It was a slow, hard, cruel day for them. Every bushman hates spinifex-country like poison, and will never tackle it if there is any other road. Spinifex is a low shrub which grows in hummocks and rings and is armed with vast numbers of keen prickles, sharp as needles and penetrating deeply into the flesh of those who brush against them. It is a desert plant, and strikes its roots into the barest and most sterile of sand.

'How much o' this?' said Jerry as they rode over a low ridge and saw a vast plain covered by the hateful plant stretching far before them.

'About five-and-twenty miles,' replied Dick; 'the soak's on the other side.'

'Uh!' grunted Jerry. 'Look out for yer legs, Dandy, old man. There won't be much skin on 'em when we see t' other side.'

'Mine thinkit track alonga big fellow oak-tree,' said Jacky, pointing to a great desert oak which stood a quarter of a mile to the west on the edge of the spinifex.

'Come on and let's look,' cried Jerry; 'that would be great luck.'

'It would,' said Dick; 'anything to save the poor beasts' legs.' For the pricking of spinifex will cause cruel sores.

They rode up to the oak, and found that Jacky was right. A rough, narrow, but very welcome track, clearly a native one, ran across the spinifex-desert, heading generally in the direction they wished to follow. Along the track they moved in single file, and made as good headway as could be hoped for through the sand. Half-way across the plain they halted for half-an-hour and washed out the horses' mouths

with a little water, and took a mouthful or two themselves. The heat was terrific, and, well seasoned as the party were, all were glad to see the spinifex thin, when about four in the afternoon they saw a bare ridge rise before them, and knew that the soak was near.

‘Whereabouts is it?’ asked Jerry.

‘I don’t know exactly,’ replied Dick. ‘Jacky knows it’s somewhere under the ridge, and we’ll soon hunt it out.’

The hunting out proved a very simple matter, for the native track ran straight up to it, and the boys drew rein about a hole in the sand, some four feet deep and perfectly dry. There was not a trace of moisture in it; but it contained a mass of sticks and stones, dead birds, and a rotting kangaroo. This did not disturb the Scouts in the least; but they shot eager glances on all sides to see if the soak had recently been visited. But not a fresh footprint was to be found, and Dick chuckled with satisfaction.

‘All hands to the pumps,’ he sang out, ‘and we’ll soon have plenty to drink.’

They dismounted and knee-haltered the horses until the soak had been tried. If it should prove a ‘duffer’ they would have to move again; but none of them believed that, for it had not been tapped for some time. Its condition showed that.

Jacky began to clear out the hole with his hands, and the other two seized their tomahawks and ran to a bloodwood sapling growing a short distance away. They had it down in a trice, and chopped away till each was provided with a rude wooden shovel, and with these they returned to the hole. By this time Jacky had cleaned it out, and it was a hollow of smooth, white, dry sand. At the bottom of this they began to dig, and half-an-hour’s steady work carried them down several feet.

‘Here we are,’ said Dick as his shovel struck something hard. ‘Here’s the rock. Now we shall soon see.’

They clambered out of the hole and stood on the edge eagerly watching. The sand in the upper corner darkened, and the Scouts raised a cheer. It was all right. The water was soaking through the sand from some underground reservoir in the rock, and the hole would slowly fill.

Now the Kangaroos turned to and got things ready for a camp. First of all they gave every drop of water in hand to the horses, and little enough it was, but there would be more before long.

'What about feed?' said Dick, and looked round. A couple of hundred yards away was a big patch of mulga scrub, and, poor as that was for forage, there was nothing else to be had. Not a blade of grass, not a single shoot of any tender green thing, was to be seen.

'Mulga,' said Jerry; 'there's nothin' else for it.'

'All right,' said Dick; 'I'll go and cut a good heap of boughs for 'em.'

'And I'll bail out the soak while Jacky unsaddles and hobbles the nags,' remarked Jerry.

Dick went at once to the mulga scrub, and with his first blow something sprang up and fled, rustling through the low, closely set trees.

'Hallo! an emu!' cried Dick as he recognised the gigantic bird. 'I'll go bail, there's a nest not far off.' He left his bough-cutting and plunged into the scrub and began to rummage about. He found the nest almost at once and raised a joyous 'Coo-ee!'

Up ran the others, and Dick pointed gleefully to the clutch of large myrtle-green eggs.

'Are they fresh?' said Jerry; and that was a serious question for the two white Scouts. Jacky continued to grin, for it was all one to him; a black will relish an emu's egg when the chick is about to chip the shell. Dick and Jerry were a trifle more particular. Dick caught up an egg and cracked it with his tomahawk, sniffed it, and gave a great

sigh of relief. 'Fresh as new paint,' he said; and Jerry capered.

'My word!' cried the latter, 'we'll have a real buster of a supper to-night. I'll work one up into pancakes fried in a billy-lid; they make stunnin' pancakes. An' I'll do one in the ashes, same as the blacks do. An' I'll make a duck-stew in a billy, an' we'll have a real tightener. Grindin' through that old spinifex has made me as hungry as a wolf.'

'Pitch in, Jerry,' said Dick; 'you make my mouth water. I'll come and lend a hand when I've set some mulga in front of the horses. You leave the soak. I'll bail that out.'

An hour later the Scouts were seated at their bark tablecloth with pancakes and a roasted egg before them. As one emu's egg is equal to ten or a dozen hens' eggs, this made a very satisfactory repast; though Jacky roasted and ate one to his own cheek. The eggs were roasted black-fellow fashion, and a good fashion it is. A small hole is chipped in the shell, and a little of the white is allowed to run out. The egg is roasted on hot ashes, and every now and again the cook takes it up and shakes it well, holding it between two handfuls of dried grass or leaves, so that yolk and white are all mixed up together.

Pretty well as soon as supper was eaten the Kangaroos turned in, for they meant to do a long day on the morrow. They had marched a good deal on foot through the yielding sand to spare the horses, and were tired. Their enemy the spinifex was now their friend, for a hummock when dug up and turned over makes a capital mattress, and Jacky had prepared the beds from clumps near at hand.

'See the Bunya River camp to-morrow night,' said Dick; and all went to sleep in hopes of a successful end to their journey.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DESERTED CAMP.

THE next day they did seven-and-fifty miles, over pretty rough country, too, and the sun was getting down when they breasted a ridge thickly dotted with forest gum and stringy bark. The crown of the ridge was bare save for three great pines, and they had hit on a track which ran straight up to the trees. Dick recognised the spot from a description which Tom Hale had given of it, and pointed ahead.

‘That’s Three Pine Ridge,’ he said, ‘and from it we shall see the camp spread along the creek.’

‘Mine thinkit nobody bin on this track good bit now,’ said Jacky.

‘You’re right, Jacky,’ said Dick; ‘it’s been bothering me a bit ever since we hit it. There’s no fresh sign on it, and Tom said it was the main track.’

They gained the three pines, and the gully below burst suddenly into view. Dick and Jerry whistled in surprise; Jacky grunted. The camp was deserted. They were looking upon that most forlorn prospect in the world, the scene of a ‘rush’ that has failed.

All along the creek the banks were dotted with hummocks of soil as if a colony of gigantic moles had been at work, and amid the hummocks were scores and scores of holes, each hole marking a claim where diggers had worked for gold. A number of windlasses had been set up and left standing, the gaunt posts still flaunting tatters of bark, so newly had they been cut. Bark gunyahs stood about here and there, but all silent, all deserted; the busy flood of life which had swept into the gully on the report of the

discovery of gold had flowed out again, leaving these signs of its activity behind it.

'My word!' said Jerry; 'they've cut an' gone. Did the fever frighten 'em away?'

'Never in this world!' replied Dick. 'Fever won't scare diggers off while the "pay-dirt" is good.'

'No,' agreed Jerry. 'I suppose the diggin's are played out. That's about what it is.'

'Yes; and perhaps word came of a better spot,' said Dick. 'Well, we'll soon find which way the rush went. One thing's pretty sure, it ain't on the back-track. There's no sign of it on the main line here. We must camp here to-night and look round.'

'Mine thinkit good gunyahs to sleep in to-night,' said Jacky.

'If you go near one of those gunyahs, Jacky, I'll baste the hide off ye with a stirrup-leather,' said Dick. 'For all we know they may be full of fever.'

'My word, Dick!' said Jerry with a grave nod, 'that's one to you. We'll keep to windward o' the whole place, I say. Let's work round a bit an' camp up-stream.'

They took a sweep to the north and came to a patch of first-rate blue grass running down a slope to the creek, and here they pitched camp.

'Jacky,' said Dick, anxious to keep the blackboy out of mischief, 'you stay here and watch the horses, and make fires and cut boughs for the beds.'

'All right,' said Jacky. 'Mine thinkit 'possum up tree. Make good supper.'

His eyes were fixed on the fork of a big box-tree near at hand, and his fingers were already clutched round the handle of his tomahawk.

'You can catch as many 'possums as you like,' returned his young master. 'But you mustn't leave the horses. You bin hear me now?'

'Yohi, yohi [yes],' said Jacky in a low voice, much impressed by the patrol-leader's sharp tones. Dick was satisfied now that Jacky would do as he was told, for he was very faithful when a strong command had been laid upon him. Left to himself, Jacky, after the style of the careless and irresponsible black-fellow, would have poked round the neglected gunyahs and picked up and treasured every rubbishing fragment left by the diggers, and thus almost certainly have laid himself open to infection.

Dick and Jerry started on a tour of the mining-camp, keeping well to the outside of the workings, and reading the tracks as they went. For some distance they found no more than the ordinary coming and going of the diggers' movements about the camp, and then they struck a well-worn trail. They followed it up for a quarter of a mile, and found that it entered the mouth of a small gully. A single glance showed them that they had hit upon the diggers' cemetery. The foot and sides of the gully were littered with mounds, under each of which slept some dead gold-seeker, struck down by the terrible fever which had swept through the camp.

'My word!' murmured Jerry in an awe-stricken voice; and Dick said never a word. Did his father lie under one of those low heaps? The same thought was in Jerry's mind. 'Let's look at the names,' he said softly; and the Scouts, baring their heads, walked up to the rude boards set at the head of the graves and began to scan them eagerly.

The progress of the outbreak could be read in the state of the boards. The first were neatly cut and the names and ages deeply graven, and often some appropriate inscription added; then, as the victims died faster, the boards were roughly hacked out and the letters and figures rudely inscribed; and finally there was a whole batch of mounds without any token to show who it was that lay beneath each heap. There was no sign of the name of

Dick's father or of his mate; but the unnamed graves made matters very uncertain, and when they had been round the little cemetery they were not much further than before.

'Fifty-three!' breathed Jerry. 'My word! Fifty-three!'

It was a terrible toll which death had taken of the gold-seekers. It had not been a big rush; indeed, from so sparsely settled a country a big rush could not be made up. Perhaps a couple of hundred or so of diggers had been on the creek, and of these at least one in four had been carried off by the deadly fever. Dick and Jerry left the gully and returned to their circuit of the camp. They had gone a hundred yards before both of them spoke at once and used the same words.

'Here it is!' they said.

They stood beside a track upon which every footstep and hoof-mark pointed in one direction, to the north-east. There had been no going and coming day by day on this trail. It was all going, and the tracks had all been made at the same time. The diggers had gone off like a regiment on the march. The Scouts stood beside the track and read the signs.

'How old, d'ye reckon?' murmured Jerry.

Dick bent and looked a little closer. 'Six days,' he replied, 'and perhaps seven.'

Jerry nodded. That was about his notion of it, but he gave the pride of place to Dick as a tracker. The latter now began to follow the track, glancing keenly from side to side, picking up every sign, every point. Jerry followed, rather wondering what Dick was up to, for the trail was the trail and he could see nothing else to it. But Jerry had capital bush manners, and knew a great deal better than to talk to and bother a first-class tracker when he was at work.

They went a good six hundred yards before Dick gave a little grunt of satisfaction.

'Got it?' cried Jerry, for he knew he might speak now when his leader had picked 'it' up, whatever it was.

'Yes,' said Dick, and he pointed to a hoof-print. 'That's the track of old Saltbush, father's camp-horse. It's the mark of his near hind-hoof. I'd know it among a big mob, for he always twists his foot in just as he sets it down.'

'All right, then,' said Jerry; 'if Saltbush was in the new rush, your father'd be on his back.'

'I hope so,' said Dick gravely, for it did not by any means follow that Mr Barry was riding his steady old favourite. This thought struck Jerry too, and the Scouts went back to camp in thoughtful silence.

There they found Jacky in high glee. He had cut out three opossums from their nests in holes in the branches, and also a 'sugar-bag' (a nest of wild bees) filled with delicious honey, and it was a capital supper they sat down to that night.

The next morning they pressed forward on the trail of the rush, and, moving much faster than the stream of diggers had travelled, by midday they passed the first camping-place, and by night reached the second. The trail now turned up a creek-bed, mostly dry, but with water-holes about a mile or so apart, and Dick led the Kangaroos to a hole about a couple of miles above the diggers' camp, lest infection should cling to the spot where they had halted on the march.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE BLACK SNAKE'S HOLE.

JUST as they gained the water-hole a slight accident happened. It came about from Gray Girl's fear of snakes. They had already found that she had a great dread of every reptile, poisonous or harmless. Whether she had ever been bitten they could not say. Dick had looked her over carefully and found no sign of any such happening; but be that as it may, when she saw a snake it always seemed time for her to go.

As Jacky drew rein beside the water-hole a big black snake, a most deadly and poisonous brute well over six feet long, came squirming from under a bush and made a dash for its hole, almost between Gray Girl's fore-legs. She gave one tremendous bound sideways into a patch of burnt scrub, and it was some time before Jacky could quiet her.

'Hallo! what's she done to herself?' said Dick. 'She isn't putting that off fore-foot down right.' He dismounted and picked up her foot, and found that she had driven a splinter of wood, burnt as hard and sharp as a tooth of steel, right into her frog.

'My word!' murmured Jerry, who had also sprung down and was beside him; 'she's just about lamed herself.'

Dick drew the splinter out very carefully, and cleaned and examined the wound. 'Might have been worse,' he said at last; 'she must have a day's rest, and then she'll go all right.'

It was very vexing thus to be interrupted when they were hot-foot on the trail; but there was nothing else for it. With a day's rest Gray Girl would go as well as ever;

without it she might go dead-lame. So they agreed to camp until she was sound again.

'There's a swampy patch down in the bed there,' said Jerry; 'we'll turn her into that. There's good grass, an' it'll keep her foot nice an' cool.'

'Right you are, Jerry,' agreed Dick; and Jacky was bidden to unsaddle the horses, hobble them, and turn them out.

'Seems to me,' went on Dick, 'that this old black snake has nailed the best bit of camping-ground just about here.'

The black snake's hole was right in the middle of a nice little flat, sheltered by a patch of mulga scrub.

'Get a stick and poke him out, Jerry,' said Dick. 'We've had enough of him; he sha'n't do us out of a good camp as well.'

Jerry drew his knife and went into the scrub in search of a long, pliant wand, while Dick looked over the ground. A black snake has always more than one way in and out of his retreat, and Dick posted himself, tomahawk in hand, at a very likely-looking hole, about three feet from that down which the deadly creature had vanished.

Back came Jerry with the stick, and poked it as far as it would go. But that was little enough, for there was a turn quite near the surface; and Jerry tossed the pliant stick down, cut himself a thick one with a sharpened point, and started to dig the reptile out. This disturbed the enemy, and before Jerry had dug more than a foot, out popped his head at the very hole where Dick was waiting. Sst! There was a flash of a bright, keen blade, and the black snake's head was whipped off and sent flying a dozen feet away. Jerry threw the earth back into the hole, and Jacky, who came up at that moment, dragged out the reptile's body. A very handsome body it was, too, a rich crimson on the under side and black above. But Jacky did not fetch it out to admire its beauty; he intended to make a private feast of it.

They now turned to and pitched camp, and while doing so Dick caught sight of a big flock of pigeons settling beside the creek up-stream.

'Pigeons coming for their evening drink,' he said. 'I'll get a few.'

'What sort?' asked Jerry.

'Bronze wing,' replied Dick.

'Fetch 'em up,' said No. 2. 'I'll cook 'em in such style that ye'll want to eat all night.'

Dick loaded both barrels of his shot-gun this time, for he wanted to make sure of plenty of food over their stay at this place, and then set out to stalk the pigeons. He put them up within easy range and fired into the thick of the mass of whirring wings. Six fell to the cylinder, five to the choke, and he went back to camp very satisfied.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NEWS !

NEXT morning Dick awoke just upon 'nerangi daylight.' He lay with his face to the east, and for a few moments watched the brightening dawn, then unrolled his blanket and sprang up. His movements wakened Jerry, and the two Scouts went at once down to the swamp to look at Gray Girl's foot.

'Any amount better,' was Jerry's verdict. 'I don't see much wrong. What luck we had a swampy patch to turn her out on !'

'It was,' said Dick. 'I was afraid she'd be a lot worse than this.'

'Do we start off again after breakfast ?' asked Jerry.

'Well, no, Jerry ; I don't think so,' replied the patrol-leader. 'I reckon myself it would be a good plan to give her a few hours again here, and perhaps work in a short march to-day, starting about the middle of the afternoon.'

'So it would,' agreed Jerry, 'and we should see how she'd go before peggin' ahead in earnest.'

About eleven o'clock that morning the Scouts gained some very interesting news. Dick and Jerry were up the creek fishing, and Jacky was watching the horses and the camp. Dick had just hauled to the bank a fine silver bream when Jerry called out sharply, 'Hello ! Look there !'

Dick looked and saw two men on foot with a led horse come into sight at a point where the diggers' trail ran round a small bluff.

'My word !' said Dick ; 'those may be two chaps coming back from the rush.'

At the thought of this they hurried at once to meet them, and in a moment they recognised one of the new-comers.

'Why, it's Sam Hardacre; the one leading the horse,' cried Jerry. 'Don't you remember him, Dick? He used to be a stockman at Narana.'

'Remember him all right,' replied Dick; and the boys ran on faster still through some low scrub.

Now they observed an odd thing; the men in the distance stood still, and seemed by their movements uncertain whether to advance or retreat. Jerry laughed.

'They can see us movin' among the bushes, an' p'r'aps they think we're warrigals;' and he raised a loud and cheery 'Coo-ee!' Upon this Sam and his friend stood still and waited, and when they saw the boys race out into the open they came on to meet them.

'Hello, Sam!' shouted Jerry as the two parties neared each other. 'Have you been in the rush?'

'That's it, Jerry,' said Sam, a tall, thin young man with the bent legs of a stockman.

'Have you seen father there, Sam?' cried Dick.

'Yes, Dick,' replied Sam; 'saw him not two hours before I left the camp.'

'How is he?'

'Oh, he's beginnin' to creep round a bit,' said Sam. 'He had an uncommon narrow squeak o' it down at Bunya River, an' he was only just able to sit on that old nag o' his when the boys shifted up on the new rush.'

'I saw old Saltbush's track on the road,' said Dick, immensely relieved to hear that his father was recovering. 'And how's M'Lean?'

'Oh, he pulled round a lot quicker than yer dad, an' he's in full work again; but it's precious little they're gettin'.'

'Isn't the new rush any good?' asked Jerry.

'Good enough for them as happen to drop on a good patch,' replied Sam. 'It's like Bunya River diggin's there.'

Down at the Bunya some did uncommon well ; some got nothin'. But the Bunya was soon finished. There was no reef, only a good-sized patch of alluvial. This new place is just the same—Lignum Flat they call it ; there's any amount o' lignums about.'

'How far again?' asked Dick.

'We left the night afore last,' replied Sam, 'about two hours arter sundown.'

'Rum time to start, Sam,' observed Jerry.

'Not so rum as you might think if you'd seen some o' our neighbours,' returned Sam. 'There was three chaps on the cross rigged up a gunyah next to ours, an' if they hadn't got an eye on stealin' our stuff, I'm a nigger.'

'Oh,' said Jerry, 'there are bad uns among the diggers, eh?'

'No,' said Sam promptly ; 'real diggers are right as rain an' straight as a gun-barrel. But there's a lot o' beach-combers an' that sort o' scum workin' down from the Gulf an' turnin' up at the diggin's.'

The Scouts nodded. They had heard many a time of the scoundrelly riff-raff of all nations which haunt some parts of the shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and recognised that such rogues were indeed very dangerous neighbours for honest diggers who had had the luck to pick up some gold.

'No,' went on Sam ; 'when we found Copra Jack and his push hangin' round our gunyah we thought it was time to clear out. You see, we'd done pretty well, an' they got to know o' it. So we slid out an' struck for home.'

'Who's Copra Jack?' asked Jerry.

'He's about the worst egg in all the lot o' that gang o' beach-combers,' replied Sam ; 'an' he's got a pair o' mates to match, a Dago an' a big yellow nigger. He'd think nothin' o' cuttin' a man's throat for an ounce o' gold. He's a big, old scamp, an' frightful ugly-lookin', for a horse once let out an' landed him one fair on the nose, an' smashed it flat

with his face. An' if his head had gone at the same time there'd been no need for honest folks to worry,' concluded Sam.

'And was he after your gold, Sam?' asked Dick.

'He was,' returned the stockman with an emphatic nod. 'We could only work one at a time; t'other had to stop an' watch the stuff. So we reckoned we might as well shift while we'd got somethin' to shift with;' and Sam nodded to a couple of strong, well-filled canvas sacks slung on the pack-horse. 'But here we are yarnin' away as if this was Ballamoola,' went on the stockman; 'an' what I want to know is, what are you kids doin' here?'

Dick explained; but his explanation was broken into by Sam's mate, a tall young fellow, who had hitherto listened in silence to the conversation.

'By gum, horses!' he exclaimed.

'Where, Joe—where?' cried Sam eagerly.

'Down there,' replied the other, and pointed to the swamp in the distance, where the horses, moving as they grazed, had just come into sight.

'They are ours,' said Dick.

'Sell us one, Dick,' said Sam in tones more eager still. 'We'll give you a rattlin' good price. I've lost mine. He got hold of some poison-weed.'

'Can't,' said Dick; 'we haven't one to spare.'

But the gold-diggers now became most importunate in their endeavours to buy one of the horses, and made the most extravagant offers. Finally they offered as much as twenty ounces of gold for Gray Girl, for they soon found that Whitesock and Dandy could not be bought at any figure.

'What's an ounce o' gold worth?' asked Jerry.

'About four pounds,' replied Sam.

The Scouts whistled. That meant they were being offered eighty pounds for a horse, a most remarkable price,

for Gray Girl, capital mare as she was, would only fetch about ten pounds in an open market.

Dick reflected, but decided not to sell. Eighty pounds was a very tempting figure, but it meant that Jacky would have to run with them; that the loads on Whitesock and Dandy would be heavier; and, again, a horse might be of untold value to them before they saw home again.

Sam was very disappointed when he found it was impossible to make a deal. To the boys' surprise, both he and his mate pushed ahead without halting for a moment at the camp when it was reached, and were soon lost to sight down the windings of the creek.

'My word!' remarked Jerry; 'wasn't Sam just about huffed 'cause we wouldn't sell? He'd no right to be. It ain't good bush style to bother anybody to sell a horse on a journey; but to be waxy about it!' and Jerry whistled.

'It's queer,' said Dick, 'and not a bit like Sam. They're in a tremendous hurry to get home with their gold, I suppose, and with another horse they could both ride, and peg ahead a bit faster.'

'Just so,' said Jerry; 'but we might want to do a bit o' that ourselves.'

Dick nodded and breathed a long sigh of relief. It had eased his mind immensely, this chat with Sam Hardacre. His father and Jim M'Lean were alive and at work at Lignum Flat. Whether their luck was good or bad it was fine to hear that, and the Scouts discussed the distance and at what time they might expect to reach the Flat.

'We'll do it easy to-morrow,' declared Jerry. 'It isn't noon yet, an' they left the night afore last, an' they've come on foot.'

Dick sat down on a saddle to think matters over, and Jerry went to drive the horses closer in to the camp. Jacky, who had been watching horses and camp, now skipped off, tomahawk in hand, to chop out a sugar-bag he had marked

down earlier in the morning in a gum-tree at some distance from the creek.

As Dick sat, his eyes were fixed on the ground which Jerry had disturbed when digging out the black snake. A large pebble there caught his attention; it had an odd, dull shine on it. He rubbed away for a moment with the ball of his thumb, and then let out a yell which brought Jerry running to his side in double-quick time.

‘What is it?’ cried Jerry.

Dick held out his hand.

‘A nugget! Gold!’ gasped Jerry. Dick nodded. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘You got it,’ replied Dick; ‘you dug it up when you turned the black snake out, and there it has been lying under our very noses.’

‘Gold! Gold! Gold!’ chortled Jerry, and hurled his hat high in the air; and Dick, not less excited, though less demonstrative, sprang to seize the pointed stick and turn out the hole afresh. Jerry cut another at once, and with glittering eyes the Scouts dug busily into the black snake’s home.

‘Just fancy,’ cried Jerry, ‘what a touch-an’-go business it all is! If we hadn’t had to dig out that black joker we’d never have had the least notion we were campin’ on gold.’

‘Many and many a place has been hit on the same way,’ returned Dick. ‘I hope there’s a bit here; we’ll soon see.’

Within half-an-hour they dug a hole a couple of feet deep and a yard across, and from that patch of ground they took eleven nuggets and a handful of coarse, slug-like pieces of gold. The nugget which Dick had found first proved the largest of all. It was, so far as they could judge, well over a pound in weight, and was a solid lump of pure gold. As the gold was turned out it was put into an empty tucker-bag, and presently the Scouts stopped to rest.

Jerry took up the bag and felt it, then passed it to Dick.

‘What do you reckon the weight?’ he said.

Dick balanced it on his palm. 'A good five pounds,' he repeated.

'Just about my notion of it,' replied No. 2. They were silent for a moment; then Dick whistled.

'My Colonial, Jerry!' he murmured. 'Think of it; just think of it. This bag is worth about three hundred sovereigns, and all for scratching a bit in this hole!'

The Kangaroos looked at each other with shining eyes and parted lips. It seemed marvellous this swift picking up of wealth, this flow of sovereigns into pockets bare of the smallest coin.

'Come on!' cried Jerry, and grasped his digging-stick anew.

'Hold hard!' said Dick; 'not another stroke—not a single one, mate.'

'What do you mean?' cried the puzzled Jerry.

'I mean this,' said Dick. 'We'll fill this hole up again and cover our tracks. Then we'll cut up to the Flat and let father and Jim McLean know about this find, bring 'em back with us, and work it all together. How's that?'

'Good,' said Jerry; 'no end good. They're up to every dodge for workin' it; an', I say, won't it be splendid, if they're havin' poor luck, to tell 'em we've hit on a pocket?'

'Glorious!' said Dick. 'I wonder how much there is. Wouldn't it be immense if it should pan out something handsome all round?'

'Rather,' said Jerry; and the Scouts turned to and pitched the dirt back into the hole with their hands and a couple of billy-lids. They trampled it well in as they worked, so that the surface was almost level when they had finished, and then they heaped a pile of brushwood on the spot and started a fire. This would conceal from any passer-by that the ground had been disturbed; for just as Sam and his mate had come down from the Flat, so some one else might come while they were away.

'We'll boil a billy and get some tea at once,' said Dick. 'There's a good lump of damper left, and we'll have a bite, start off, and travel as long as we can see. Gray Girl can go all right, I know.'

'Right-o!' cried Jerry, and ran to the waterside to fill the billy. He came back and set it on the edge of the fire, now burning furiously, for all the wood was as dry as tinder.

'There,' said Jerry; 'we'll boil our billy on the coverin'-fire for luck, an' hope there's a golden hearthstone underneath. My word, Dick! this is a journey, eh? S'pose we all go back with a little pile apiece? Soon have some beasts on the run, I reckon!'

Dick nodded, and looked into the tucker-bag with sparkling eyes. For money, as money, the patrol-leader did not care a rap. But when he thought of the loads of care which a lucky find of gold would lift off their hearts, he was filled with a thankfulness too deep for words. He now rolled up the tucker-bag, stowed it at the bottom of his billy, and began to 'Coo-ee!' to call Jacky back. But the blackboy had gone farther than they thought, and no answering cry came through the hot stillness of the burning noon.

CHAPTER XL.

THE OLD SWAGGY.

SUDDENLY Jerry began to laugh. 'Well, I'm blest!' he said. 'Just look who's comin' down the track! I don't believe you could poke your nose into the last corner of the "Never-Never" but what you'd find an old "swaggy" had got there before you.'

Dick turned and looked up the track. Coming very slowly towards them was an old swagman, a broad but bent figure, his swag on his shoulders wrapped in a blue blanket, his hat pulled down low over his eyes, and apparently feeling his way with a stick. Such foot-travellers, their worldly possessions packed in a 'bluey' and swung over their shoulders, are met with in every part of Australia. Many of them are 'sundowners,' loafers and tramps, who turn up at a station at sundown and beg for rations, and then hit the track early next morning for fear they shall be asked to do some work in return; and some are genuine out-of-works in search of a job.

The old swaggy drew nearer, and the Kangaroos saw that his face was hidden by a big red handkerchief, which nearly met the brim of his hat, and that he stumbled and felt with his stick like a blind man. The Scouts remained quite silent, watching the strange figure, and the swaggy paused at some distance and held his head on one side as if listening intently. He came on a little farther, paused, and listened again. His actions seemed more and more like those of a blind man; but what a blind man could be doing in these desert wastes was a puzzle past solving.

Suddenly he called out. 'Mates!' he cried, 'is anybody hereabouts? I heard a "Coo-ee!" a bit back. Is there

anybody about as 'ud lend a poor chap a hand or give him a lift?'

'Come this way,' cried Dick. 'What's wrong with you? Are you blind?'

'Why, mates,' he said as he steered towards the sound of Dick's voice, 'I might just as well be a'most. I've got a frightful turn o' sandy-blight.'

'Sandy-blight!' cried Jerry. 'No wonder you're fumblin' about. That's pretty bad for ye on this track. I had three weeks o' it myself last year, an' I don't want another dose, not if I live to be ninety. I had to live in a dark room.'

'Sandy-blight' is an affection which attacks the eyes; it is caused by the heat, the glare, the dust, and, above all, by the flies. The patient suffers severe pain and cannot bear a bright light; very often the lids are glued together by a flow of matter, and only constant washing with warm water enables the sufferer to open his eyes and get a glimpse of things about him. At home, within reach of help and a shaded room, it is a most cruel affliction; on the track it is an almost unbearable torture. The hearts of the Scouts were at once stirred at the thought of the plight of this poor old swaggy.

Jerry sprang forward to lend him a hand. 'Here you are, mate,' said Jerry. 'Come this way. Here's a log ye can sit on in as much shade as there is. An' I'll get ye a billy o' tea in no time. But what are ye doin' on the track by yerself in this state?'

'I had a mate,' replied the old fellow, 'but I buried him at Bunya River. He went down wi' the fever. I've been up at the Flat a bit; but it was no go for me, so I'm workin' back south. My eyes weren't so bad till a bit back; then they were took quite sudden.'

'It does lay hold o' ye with a jump at times,' said Jerry. 'Let me have a look at 'em. Perhaps I can wash 'em and get 'em a bit easier for you.'

'Thank ye,' said the swaggy; 'but I daren't uncover 'em. The light would be cruel to 'em.'

'So it would,' agreed Jerry; 'I remember how it was myself.'

The two boys now busied themselves in turning out a meal for the distressed traveller. Jerry fetched flour and began knocking up some Johnny-cakes, for the damper would not be enough to go round. Dick warmed some pigeon-stew. Suddenly they were startled by a savage voice, not a note in it like the whine of the swaggy.

'Bail up!' it growled.

They whirled round, to discover a marvellous change, and to know that they stood in great danger. The swaggy was sitting up very straight on the log; his stick was thrown to the ground, his red handkerchief was torn from his face, and in his steady right hand was held a big, blue revolver.

'Don't move,' he said grimly. 'I'll drop the first as lifts a foot.'

Dick and Jerry knew better than to move, for upon the spot they saw that they were dealing with a ferocious desperado. Two keen, cruel eyes were bent upon them over the shining barrel, not a trace of sandy-blight in them; and between the eyes a smashed and flattened nose, beaten level with the cheek-bones, gave a most sinister and hideous cast to the whole face. It was Copra Jack. The Scouts knew that very well; but they eyed him steadily and waited for the next move.

'I say, mister,' drawled Jerry gently, 'you've stuck up the wrong folks; me and my mate ain't got a ha'penny between us; we're stony-broke.' For the moment Jerry had forgotten the gold.

'Don't you be so flash, my young joker,' said Copra Jack dryly; 'you've got plenty o' things useful for me. An' don't fidget neither, unless ye want yer inside injured.'

Keeping the revolver full on the Scouts, the ruffian raised his left hand to his mouth and blew a shrill whistle on two fingers. A couple of minutes later a little dark fellow came running along the road.

‘Hello!’ murmured Jerry; ‘here’s the Dago.’

It was an incautious remark. The desperado’s eyes twinkled. ‘Oh, ho!’ he said. ‘So ye’ve heard a bit about me an’ my mates. That means ye’ve met Sam Hardacre an’ Joe. All right. We’ll see about that just now.’

Jerry could have bitten his tongue off; but the mischief was done, and the Dago came up.

‘You got ’um?’ said the Dago, who might, by his looks, have belonged to any one of half-a-dozen countries along the Mediterranean.

‘Oh, ah, got ’em easy enough,’ replied Copra Jack. ‘I dunno as I need ha’ gone to the trouble I did. It’s on’y a pair o’ kids, but their swag’ll come in useful.’

‘Oh, the horses! ah, the horses!’ said the Dago, and rubbed his hands with unholy joy as he looked at the three good nags near at hand.

‘Yes; that’s as right as right can be,’ growled the other. ‘Just what we wanted. We’ll soon run down Mr Sam an’ his mate now.’

Dick choked back a groan of despair. Not only were they to be robbed, and perhaps murdered, but their fate would seal that of Sam and Joe. Now he understood the strange behaviour of the diggers when the Scouts were seen first among the bushes; now he knew why they were in such haste to push forward. They must have suspected that they were being followed by these ruffians who sought their hard-earned gold.

‘Tie ’em up, mate,’ said Copra Jack, and pointed to a couple of gum saplings a few yards away.

‘What for?’ cried the Dago. ‘You shoot ’um now. No more bother. What for trouble to tie ’um up?’

'Tie 'em up!' roared Copra Jack. 'Who's bossin' this show, you or me? Do as I tell ye, an' do it quick.'

The blood-thirsty little villain shook his head as if he did not understand this waste of time and trouble, but he obeyed orders without another word. He whipped out a knife and cut one of Jerry's blankets into long strips, and with these he tied up Dick and Jerry very quickly and securely. It was useless to resist. The Scouts were unarmed, and it was clear that these desperadoes thought no more of taking a man's life than of killing a snake.

'Where's the Buck?' asked Copra Jack.

'Him follow track. No come back yet,' replied the Dago.

'We're on the track all right,' said the leader. 'I hope he'll turn up soon, an' then we can go right ahead.'

It sounded as if they had been thrown out in some way or other and the third member of the gang was running a track to find out the trail of the diggers.

'Now I'll look through the swag if you'll look arter them,' said Copra, and he began to turn over their kit.

The Scouts watched him with fast-beating hearts. The gold must be discovered now—the gold which had been their pride, and would now be their utter destruction, for they knew well that so desperate a scoundrel would not allow any one to live whom he had robbed and who could bring a charge against him.

The discovery was made almost at once. Dick's billy was turned out and the heavy bag fell to the ground with a thump. Copra Jack picked it up, opened it, and drew out a handful of its contents. A tremendous cry of surprise burst from his lips. 'Gold!' he roared. 'Why, these kids ha' struck it, an' we never found a speck. It's gold!'

The Dago ran to look, and the ruffians grinned at each other as the leader went on. 'Look at it!' he cried. 'It's fresh dug. See here! the dirt's new in the cracks. It's been got here or hereabouts.'

'I find where 'um dig,' cried the Dago.

'Ye may or ye may not,' replied Copra Jack; 'but ye can take this for a lesson never to be in too much of a hurry. Don't tie 'em up, ye said. All right; where should we be now if I'd put 'em through as ye wanted? Now we can find out where they hit on the stuff.'

'Ah, I was wrong; I was wrong,' said the Dago in most penitent tones.

'Good job ye got the sense to see it,' replied his leader, and walked up to the captives.

'Whose tucker-bag is this?' he demanded.

'Mine,' said Dick at once.

'The Buck; he come,' murmured the Dago at the leader's shoulder.

Copra Jack glanced up the track, and the captives glanced too. They knew the new-comer at once, and saw that dangers were thickening around them at every moment. *It was the half-caste.* Dick and Jerry looked at each other—one wild look—then watched the half-caste lope swiftly up to the spot where they stood bound and helpless.

'Who have you got hold of, Jack?' he asked quietly, then glanced at the two Scouts.

He knew Jerry at once, and a most striking change passed over his face. All the lust of a savage for his enemy's blood blazed up in his fierce eyes, and his teeth were bared in a grin of wild exultation to see his victim helpless to escape his vengeance. His hand fell to his belt; he drew a knife, and leapt at the Scout and struck. The weapon flashed in a gleaming arc, the point directed to make that most deadly blow which, striking inside the collar-bone, drives the blade home to inflict a mortal wound.

CHAPTER XLI.

DICK'S ORDEAL.

JERRY'S mortal career would have been ended by that cowardly blow had not Copra Jack made a spring like a rock-wallaby and struck out with his left fist. The blow caught the half-caste's arm as the knife descended and turned aside that fatal aim. Instead of being plunged into the body of the helpless victim, the keen blade glanced above Jerry's shoulder and was driven deeply into the trunk of the sapling to which the Scout was bound.

Then Copra Jack drew off a little to get play, and out shot his right fist, landing with tremendous force full in the half-caste's face and hurling him headlong to the ground. The desperado was in a mad, tearing rage with his followers. He called them every frightful name he could lay his tongue to. He jumped; he danced in his fury; his wicked eyes gleamed like coals in his flat, horrible face.

'Of all the pushes I ever ran,' he howled, 'if you two ain't the dead-finish. Fust the Dago wants to pistol 'em, an' now the Buck goes for 'em with a knife. An' they may well be worth a big fortune to us. Was ever a man wuss plagued wi' two born fools?'

The half-caste picked himself up and listened to the tirade in sullen quietude. He did not seem to resent in the least the smashing blow which he had received, but wiped the blood away from his split lip, and awaited his turn to speak. The Dago looked on in wonder, glancing from one to the other of his companions as if he could not make out what it all meant.

'Look here, Jack,' said the half-caste when the leader had spent his fury of denunciation; 'you've stopped me for

the minute, and it seems you've got your reasons for it. Very well; but remember this. He's mine, he is;' and the half-caste, with a look of deadly hate, pointed to Jerry. 'He is my enemy, and I have never failed yet to get level with an enemy.'

'Who wants to stop yer in the long-run?' shouted the ruffian. 'Do what yer like with him when I've done with 'em. Go an' dig a hole fer him ready, if that 'll cool ye off a bit; but let anybody lay a finger on 'em as long as they're useful to me an' I'll let him know what it's like to play on the cross with Copra Jack.'

'All right,' said the half-caste quietly. 'You take your time and I'll take mine. I can wait.'

'Now we'll go on again a bit,' said the leader, turning once more to Dick. 'So, young feller, that was your tucker-bag, was it; an' I'll lay a trifle you put that gold in it less than a couple o' hours ago.'

Dick said nothing.

'Now, are ye goin' to tell me where ye hit the yellor stuff?'

'No fear!' said Dick.

This bold reply did not anger the desperado. It served rather to amuse him. He showed all the broken, yellow fangs which he called teeth in a wide, cruel grin, and chuckled; but it was a diabolical chuckle.

'P'raps I shall have to make ye,' he remarked.

Again Dick was silent.

Copra Jack turned to Jerry. 'Any chance wi' ye, my stony-broke son?' he asked politely.

'Not a bit,' returned Jerry.

'Well, then, what time did Sam and his mate pass?'

No answer was given.

'This is fool-business,' cried the Dago. 'We lose the time. The others go on—on quick with the gold.'

'You shut up,' said the leader. 'We're bound to spell-o a bit. Here's tea an' tucker all convenient, an' we'll have a

bite, an' then run 'em down pretty soon wi' them nags there. Meanwhile we'll see if we can't find out about this little goldfield as these two seem to be a-keepin' to theirselves.—Buck, you go off an' find me a soldier-ants' nest.'

'There's one.' The half-caste pointed to the foot of a silver-box thirty yards away. His marvellous eye had already discovered it.

'All right,' said Copra Jack. 'Well, we'll get some tucker into us, an' then we'll peg that un down over it'—pointing to Dick—'an' give the "soldiers" a chance at him. If he don't tell, it'll encourage t'other one to open his mouth.'

Dick's mouth went dry with horror. The desperado meant it; Dick could not doubt that, and the torture of burning alive at the stake could not be greater than the frightful punishment intended for him. The soldier-ant is a ferocious fellow over an inch in length. Every one holds him in awe, and every one gives him all the room he wants. He will attack any living creature he can reach, and that creature will have a terrible time of it; for the soldier-ant's sting is worse than a hornet's, and the poison much more deadly. When disturbed, soldier-ants swarm out of their nest in hundreds and attack the disturber. To his flesh they cling with their powerful nippers as they sting and sting, and his body swells like a balloon with the poison. There are many awful deaths, but none more awful than to be stung and bitten to death by soldier-ants. And this terrible fate hung over the leader of the Kangaroos.

'Shift him over there,' commanded Copra Jack, pointing to Dick. 'I don't mean to let 'em talk to each other. Let 'em do a bit o' quiet thinkin' about what's goin' to happen. That's the best thing.'

Dick was unbound and dragged to a gidyal-tree and tied up again. Within twenty minutes the rascals had finished their hasty meal, and the leader ordered his followers to bring Dick across to the silver-box, and lent a hand himself.

Dick braced himself for a burst for freedom when his lashings were thrown off, and tried to tear himself free from the clutches of his captors. But the odds were too great, and the Dago and the half-caste clung to him tightly, while the chief ruffian whipped out his revolver and put it to the Scout's ear, and he was overpowered. In two minutes he was tied to the silver-box, in full sight of Jerry, who watched the scene with a bursting heart.

'You two go and fetch the horses up,' commanded the leader; 'we'll be off pretty soon now. I'll talk to this un. He can't stir a peg.'

They went away, and the desperado watched them till they were out of earshot. Then he turned quickly to Dick.

'Look here,' he said in a low voice; 'what's the good o' playin' the fool an' bein' obstinate? Ye've hit on gold. That's plain enough. Let me in an' I'll stand in with ye, an' be a good mate, too.'

'And what of them?' said Dick, nodding to the two figures going towards the horses.

'No use lettin' 'em in,' replied the doubly treacherous villain. 'On'y make too many to share the stuff. Leave 'em to me. I'll clear 'em out o' our way.'

'Yes,' replied Dick coolly; 'and clear me and my mate out of the way as well when you knew what you wanted.'

'Never,' said Copra Jack earnestly. 'You can trust me. We'll share up, us three, fair an' square. As for them two, what does it matter about them? On'y a Dago an' a nigger. No; you treat me right an' ye'll find I'm a clean potato.'

He waited for Dick's answer; but the Scout said nothing.

'What do yer say?' cried the desperado impatiently.

'I say no,' replied Dick quietly.

'I'll ask ye again in ten minutes,' said Copra Jack in a tone of grim significance, and turned aside to cut a long, thin branch. He came back with it and began poking it down

the hole which led to the soldier-ants' nest. This hole was within twenty inches of Dick's feet as he stood bound to the trunk, and he would be discovered at once by the ferocious little creatures when they rushed out to see who was disturbing them.

Suddenly there was an outburst of cries in the distance. Dick looked that way and saw that Dandy had broken loose and was galloping away. The Dago had caught him, taken the hobbles off, and started to lead him back to the camp. Now Dandy had his likes and dislikes; he disliked very much to be handled by a stranger, so he had made a sudden snatch, broken loose, and was galloping off, tossing his head and enjoying his freedom.

Copra Jack paused for a moment to shout a few objurgations after his clumsy follower, while the half-caste leapt on the bare back of Whitesock and rode in hot pursuit of the fugitive. It made Dick's heart burn to see his favourite in the hands of the yellow ruffian; but at the next moment his thoughts were fully occupied by his own most desperate plight.

'Come out o' it,' growled the beach-comber as he poked and poked away at the hole; 'come out wi' them red-hot stings o' yourn, ye little beasts. Ye'd be up soon enough if ye knowed o' the fine feast I've got ready for ye.'

He stopped, stood back, and watched the hole, expectant. Dick could not help watching too; his fascinated eyes were drawn to the spot whence the little horrors would stream forth to assail him.

'Ah, here they come!' said the desperado in a cheerful, satisfied tone; and Dick could not resist a shiver as he saw the first of the swarm run up from the hole and pause just outside as if to reconnoitre the ground. But the Boy Scout set his teeth and resolved not to give in. He knew their doom was sealed unless help should come; and whence could it come? The hate of the half-caste, the murderous instincts

of the beach-comber, even more terrible because more cold-blooded, made it certain that their lives would not be granted them; and then to give up to these assassins the secret of the gold find! Never! Dick felt that he would endure any tortures first.

He looked round wildly on every hand. Could no help be near? The beach-comber laughed—a grim, cruel laugh.

‘No use to stare about,’ he growled; ‘better open your mouth an’ take my offer!’

But Dick looked again, looked eagerly. A figure was coming through a patch of mulga scrub; but it was only a naked wild black, and Dick’s heart sank again, for at sight of the figure a thrill of hope had run through him.

Copra Jack had seen the warrigal too, and his revolver was instantly in his hand. But there was only one, a young buck and unarmed, holding on high a string of fish. He came up to within thirty yards, then paused, and held his string of fish higher still and shouted, ‘White-fella, white-fella, give a ticcaponce.’

Dick caught his breath. He knew that voice. *It was Jacky.* But a Jacky transformed out of all knowledge. The blackboy had stripped off his clothing save for a string round his waist, and from this string hung three snakes and a couple of kangaroo-rats. He was a perfect picture of the young buck who has been out hunting, who has laid aside his weapons to allay any suspicion when approaching a camp, and who has come to offer for sale something which he thinks the white man may need. The few words he uttered were quite in character, for plenty of the wild blacks have camped at times near a station, and picked up a few words of ‘white-fellows’ yabber’ and learned something of the names and uses of money.

Again the new-comer sang out, ‘White-fella, white-fella, give a ticcaponce.’

‘Give ye sixpence?’ growled the beach-comber. ‘Clear

off or I'll give ye a bullet ;' and he pointed his weapon at the black figure, and laughed brutally when the apparent warrigal cowered and yelled in terror. Blacks have a greater dread of a revolver than of a rifle. They believe the deadly little weapon will go on pop-popping for ever, and Jacky gave a very fine exhibition of fright when the muzzle covered him. Copra Jack had not the smallest intention of pulling the trigger. Not that he had the least compunction about shooting the black. He would have thought as little of that as of shooting a dingo; and then, again, he would no more think of wasting a cartridge on a solitary, unarmed black than on a dingo, for cartridges were scarce and precious; he had other uses for them. So he took no more notice of the trembling young black, and turned again to Dick.

'Ah,' he breathed in a tone of deep satisfaction, 'that's more like business!'

The ants were now streaming steadily out of the hole and moving restlessly about. In a few moments more they would attack their victim. Dick held himself perfectly still as the venomous little beasts swarmed about his feet. It was a temptation to stamp upon them, to destroy as many as possible; but he knew how useless that would be. To move, to kill some, would only wake the others to fresh fury and launch fresh hordes upon him.

CHAPTER XLII.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

OUT on the plain a faint drumming of hoofs sounded. The beach-comber glanced over his shoulder and saw that his comrades were returning with Dandy once more safe in hand. He turned quickly to Dick.

‘Now’s your last chance,’ he growled—‘yer very last. Don’t ye make any mistake about it. Say “No,” an’ I’ll see ye eaten alive. Say “Yes,” an’ I’ll cut the ropes an’ ye’ll be safe an’ sound, an’ there’ll on’y be me extra to share the dust.’

Dick started and quivered. An ant cleared the top of his stocking and drove its huge poisonous sting deep into his knee. Flesh and blood could not stand unmoved before that piercing pain; but Dick shut his teeth tight and made no sound.

‘That’s one—on’y one,’ said the desperado fiercely and eagerly. ‘Think what it’ll be when there’s hundreds an’ hundreds feedin’ on ye. Give in, I tell ye; give in.’

In his burning anxiety to force from Dick the secret of the gold-mine, he had utterly forgotten the young black; indeed, he never thought for a moment of the faintest danger threatening from that quarter. But the black figure was gliding, gliding up, silently as a shadow. Suddenly a yell rang from the riders. The half-caste had seen Jacky, and scented the danger of which the desperado did not dream.

At sound of that cry Jacky swept into action. He whipped his hand behind him and swung it on high, holding a short, heavy throwing-stick, which had been thrust into his waist-string at the back and hidden by his body.

Whiz! the club went flying through the air, hurled with

tremendous force and unerring aim. So swift was Jacky's movement that the beach-comber was only turning his head to ascertain the reason of the half-caste's cry when the missile was on its way. He turned, to receive the blow full on his right temple, and such was its stunning force that he reeled and fell.

Jacky was following at full speed behind his throwing-stick, plucking his knife from the body of a kangaroo-rat, where he had hidden it.

Slash! Slash! The keen knife in the strong hand cut Dick's bonds with a couple of sweeping blows, and they were off and away for the tree where Jerry was bound, and he too was freed.

'Run—run!' shouted Dick as he glanced behind, for revolvers were cracking and bullets were flying after them thick and fast. Copra Jack was up and firing wildly upon the escaping Scouts; but he was still dizzy from the effects of that shrewd crack, and his aim was bad. The Dago was yelling and shooting; but Dick's quick eye caught the real danger at once. The half-caste held a revolver in his hand; but its muzzle was pointing upward, and he was saving his fire and bending Whitesock round a clump of gidyahs to run the Scouts down in the open.

Dick kept his head and coolly looked over the ground as he ran.

'This way,' he cried, and shot off to the left. The others followed. 'Into the scrub!' snapped Dick; and not another word was said. They needed their breath for the race for life which lay before them. A full half-mile away was a patch of scrub, far too dense for any horse to enter, the only thick patch in the neighbourhood. If they could reach that they would be safe for the moment at any rate, and they flew across the hard-baked ground at the greatest speed their fleet young limbs could compass.

Dick glanced over his shoulder and saw the half-caste



Slash! Slash! The keen knife in the strong hands cut Dick's bonds.

shoot into sight beyond the gidyahs. The change of direction had thrown him out, and he swung Whitesock round and drove him at top pace after the fugitives. The Dago was pounding along on Gray Girl; but him Dick did not fear. If they were caught, it would be by the more terrible pursuer, the savage, merciless half-caste.

Whitesock was the enemy! The enemy! It seemed incredible and frightful to Dick to think that his own splendid, incomparable little black might now encompass their destruction; that the speed of which he had been so proud might bring a blood-thirsty foe upon them. Oh, if they could but gain the scrub! If they could not, it would be all over with them. Galloping upon them, the half-caste would shoot them down with the utmost ease.

The Scouts ran as they had never run before. Every one of them knew whose quick hoofs were beating so swiftly and regularly on the sun-baked plain behind them, and they ran, dreading to hear with every moment that deadly fusillade open in their rear. Lucky indeed was it for them that Dick's judgment had changed their course. The sheering off which threw out the half-caste gave them a good two hundred yards, and they needed every inch of it with such a flier as Whitesock in pursuit.

Dick glanced again. The half-caste was riding superbly, and Whitesock was coming on like a whirlwind. He turned his head and his heart sank. They would never reach the scrub—never, never. Whitesock would catch them out on the open plain, and do it easily. Dick could not be deceived as to the powers of his noble little horse, and he eased very slightly in his stride and let his comrades forge ahead. As the leader, the post of danger fell to him, and it was now in the rear. He looked on either side as he ran for something that would serve as a weapon. The Scouts had been searched, and he had not even his knife, though that would not have availed him much against an armed and mounted man. If

he could drop his hand on a short, heavy stick to use as a throwing-stick, that would be of some service ; but they were crossing open, naked ground, and nothing of the sort was to be seen.

Jacky looked round and fell back beside his master.

'Mine thinkit Whitesock catch up,' said the blackboy.

'Yes, Jacky,' said Dick.

'Mine keep back and throw knife at warrigal,' went on Jacky. 'You run on. Mine sure to hit 'um with knife.'

Jacky was a wonderful hand at throwing a knife, and his noble offer to fall back and tackle the enemy while his master escaped stirred Dick deeply.

'No, no, Jacky,' cried Dick. 'Keep on, keep on ; we 'll stand together.'

At that instant there was a loud cry in front. Dick and Jacky looked ahead, and were surprised to see Jerry give a great leap and vanish from sight. On they sped, and raced up to the brink of a gully—a gully which could not be seen until the runners gained its very edge, for a little bank on this side hid the farther lip. It was a gully which had been torn out of the face of the plain in time of flood, and the water had cut a clean, square-sided channel ten feet deep and forty feet across.

It was a shout of joy which Jerry had uttered as he leapt down to the sandy bed, and the shout was re-echoed as Dick and Jacky bounded down and darted across the flat of the channel and swarmed up the opposite bank and hurried on. They were not forty yards from the little gully when the half-caste galloped up to the other bank. Had nothing stood in his way he would have been among his victims in a few moments ; but at the first glimpse of the gully he reined back Whitesock on his haunches. Easy it would have been to leap the gallant black into the huge trench ; but how to get him out on the other side ? The pursuer darted swift glances up and down,

then sent Whitesock full tilt for a spot below where he espied a break in the bank. He gained it, rode into the channel, galloped madly across, and drove Whitesock at a shelving slope. Nimble as a cat, the gallant little beast scrambled up and once more was dashing at full speed after the runners.

‘Peg ahead!’ shouted Dick; ‘he’s got over a lot quicker than we want;’ and the runners fixed their eyes on the dark mass of low trees and brushwood and put all their strength into one last tremendous burst.

It was a terrific struggle in the blinding glare and blazing heat. The sweat poured into their eyes; their breath came in short, fierce gasps; the blood drummed in their ears as Whitesock’s hoofs drummed on the hard soil; but they won—they won. The half-caste was still a good sixty yards behind when the three Scouts hurled themselves among the bushes, and diving, pushing, and squirming, worked their way into the thick cover, and paused in shelter of a white gum, the only big tree in the patch of scrub.

Jerry was about to let out a yell of victory, when Dick held up his hand for silence. ‘No need to let ’em know where we are,’ panted the leader.

CHAPTER XLIII.

IN THE SCRUB.

THEY kept quite still, and heard the half-caste gallop up to the edge of the scrub. In his rage he fired a couple of shots in at the point where the Boy Scouts had disappeared ; but this was a sheer waste of ammunition, and he soon paused.

The boys could plainly hear his murmurs of savage anger as he rode up and down, searching for a break at which he might force in the horse in pursuit ; but there was none, and presently he reined up and remained perfectly still. Some minutes passed, during which the Scouts regained their wind, and then they heard a fresh pounding of hoofs, and up rode the other two.

There was no mistake about the arrival of Copra Jack. Oaths and threats poured out of the mouth of the beach-comber in an almost inarticulate flood. Could they have seen him they would have seen his horrible face livid with fury, and he roared out a demand whether the half-caste had got one with the shots he fired.

By this time the half-caste had regained his normal manner of deadly quietude. 'No,' he said shortly ; 'I didn't get one. But they're boxed up in here. They can't get away from us.'

'I go in ; I drag 'um out ; I shoot ; I kill !' cried the Dago.

'Don't shoot the one I want,' said the half-caste. 'He's mine, and I'll have him to myself.'

'An' I want that young buck !' roared Copra Jack. 'I'll murder him by inches once I ketch hold o' him ! I'll'—and the words died away in gasps and gurgles in his throat as his fury carried him to the verge of choking.

'No need to make a lot of fuss,' said the half-caste. 'They're in this patch of scrub, and they've either got to stop in or clear out. If we keep watch on each side of the patch and they make a break, we'll get 'em on the run in open country.'

'You watch ; I go in,' cried the Dago. 'I shoot ; I drive. You wait and catch.'

'Right you are, Dago,' said the beach-comber, pulling himself together and once more taking command of affairs. 'You're the very chap to do that. Ye see, you're no more'n half the size o' me or Buck. Ye can foller 'em where we'd be stuck at once.'

'Yes, yes ; I follow,' cried the Dago ; and behind his back the beach-comber and the half-caste exchanged a look of deep meaning.

Neither of them would have dreamed for a second of following the fugitives into the thick scrub, and the Dago was no bushman or he would have been quite as unwilling. But they were quite willing to see the Dago make the attempt, and encouraged him warmly in the project. The half-caste could have tracked the boys through the scrub with perfect ease. But in such a tangle the tracker may be easily ambushed, and he knew that at any instant a nulla-nulla or waddy might be dropped on his head with stunning force by an unseen foe.

As for the beach-comber, though no tracker, he well understood the dangers of thick bush, especially with a blackboy somewhere in it, and he had not the smallest idea of creeping a yard away from the open. In this case Dick and Jerry were just as dangerous to follow as any native, but the blackboy was quite enough for him. The Dago knew nothing of these dangers, and considered that, revolver in hand, he was a match for a hundred unarmed boys, white or black.

So in he crawled, and the others separated to watch the

scrub on opposite sides. Before they parted they exchanged a few words.

'I dunno,' said the beach-comber; 'he might drive one o' 'em out. I'd be mighty glad if he did. There's gold about, that's a fact, an' we'd like to know where it is.'

The half-caste wrinkled his flat lips in a contemptuous grin. 'He'll do no good,' he said.

'May as well let him try,' rejoined Copra Jack; 'it ain't hurtin' us any. If he gets into a fix we'll be no worse off.'

'Not a bit,' said the half-caste carelessly, and rode away to the other side.

By this time the Lone Patrol had withdrawn deeper into the scrub, and lay in a small open space under a dwarf cedar. Here Dick seized Jacky's hand and shook it, and patted his black, shining shoulder.

'My word, Jacky!' he said; 'you big chief this time. Mine thinkit all over with Dick and Jerry; but Jacky come and save 'um. Good boy, Jacky!' And Jerry praised and thanked the faithful black; though all passed in the faintest whispers lest the foe without should catch some sound and discover their whereabouts.

Jacky was immensely pleased with this praise, and above all with shaking hands, which he considered was a great honour, and grinned and showed his white teeth and chuckled noiselessly.

'My word,' breathed Jerry, 'if Jacky ain't a Boy Scout an' a half, an' no mistake! I reckon he's worth a place in the Kangaroos. I feel a bit cheap to think I sniffed at him at first.'

'Yes, Jacky's the real thing,' said Dick. 'I reckon B.P. himself would be proud of Jacky this time as one of his push.'

'Sure enough,' replied Jerry; and then they became all attention as Jacky gave a tiny hiss and held up a finger.

Dick and Jerry listened and heard movements as of some one working into the scrub.

'The Dago,' breathed Dick; and Jerry nodded. A moment's listening had told them at once that it was a very raw hand that was following them, and it must be the Dago, for the half-caste would have come like a serpent, and the beach-comber would be certain to stay out on guard.

'Mine thinkit little man,' said Jacky with a low chuckle, looking into his master's face.

And Dick nodded.

'Mine thinkit fetch 'um alonga this place,' whispered Jacky.

And Dick said, 'Fetch him along, Jacky;' and the naked black slid into the scrub and vanished without the faintest sound.

A tiny whistle from Dick's lips and Jacky was back again, his eyebrows raised in inquiry.

'Knife,' whispered Dick, and Jacky handed over the only weapon remaining to the three of them and disappeared again.

With the knife Dick cut a couple of short, heavy throwing-sticks, and they took one apiece, then slipped into cover of a thick tangle of Wonga vine which lay at one side of the tiny clearing. Soon they heard a scuttling and a scrambling, and knew that Jacky had allowed the Dago to get a glimpse of him and that the Dago was in hot pursuit. Then there came two shots from a revolver—crack! crack!—and the Dago raised a shrill yell of delight.

'I get one,' he shouted; 'I shoot 'um. I drop 'um.'

'Who is it?' roared Copra Jack outside the scrub.

'It is zee black who smack your head wid zee stick,' replied the Dago.

'Is he dead or wounded?' demanded the beach-comber. 'Get 'em alive if ye can.'

'I not know,' was the answer; 'I now go to see. He drop behind zee bush.'

Dick and Jerry grinned cheerfully at each other. Jacky might very well have fallen behind a bush ; but the Dago who could drop him in such thick cover had not landed in Australia yet ; that was one thing they felt pretty sure of. A moment later they were certain.

‘Ah, he is crawl away!’ cried the Dago. ‘I follow. I catch ’um. I bring ’um out.’

Now Jacky began to groan horribly, and at the next instant he appeared, hopping across the open space like a wallaby with one hind-leg broken. He kept a wary eye behind him, though, and nipped round the cedar-tree as the revolver cracked again and a bullet whistled along and thundered into the trunk. Again the revolver cracked, and now the hoarse voice of the beach-comber rang out from without in fierce tones of reproach. ‘What are ye up to, Dago,’ he shouted, ‘chuckin’ ammunition about like that? Take time an’ save yer shots. We ain’t got such a stock as all that.’

But the Dago was beyond all heed of good advice. He now scrambled out of the tangle of bushes into the open space, and leapt forward, as he believed, to finish the black crouching behind the tree. He held his pistol in his right hand and a large sheath-knife in his left. His eyes were blazing with excitement, he was shouting remarks in a tongue the boys did not understand, and he was waving his revolver triumphantly. He was pretty quick, too ; but Jacky was a trifle quicker. Peeping round the trunk, he played bo-peep with the Dago and his revolver, and for a full couple of minutes kept the tree most cleverly between him and his pursuer. The Dago leapt this way and that to get a shot, and grew madder and shouted louder with every second which passed ; and Jacky, cool and nimble, dodged the revolver-muzzle with wonderful skill.

Dick and Jerry were ready to burst with laughter as they watched the scene from cover of the Wonga vine, and when

Jacky, apparently blundering round the tree into the arms of the pursuer, drew a fifth shot, and all to no purpose, Jerry exploded into a loud guffaw.

Round whirled the Dago on his heel, and the Scouts saw it was time for the throwing-sticks, for a chance bullet fired into the ambush might do mischief.

Dick had his stick already poised. He marked the hand clutching the revolver, and whiz! went the little club and landed full on the knuckles. There was an explosion and a terrific yell from the Dago. The blow had caused him to raise his hand sharply and press the trigger, and the bullet had cut the upper part of his right ear clean off. Jerry, too, had his eye on the pistol-hand; but seeing that it no longer meant danger, he changed his aim at the very second of throwing and smote the fist which held the knife.

Pistol and knife dropped to the ground from the numbed and aching fingers, and the Dago, shaking his sore fists, danced round in a rage, seeking those mysterious enemies who struck so hard, themselves unseen. But at the next instant the two Scouts leapt from their cover and Jacky came rushing from the other side, and the Lone Patrol swarmed over him and pulled him down.

'This is great,' said Jerry. 'I wish the rest 'ud come in; but I reckon they know a trick worth two o' that. Anyhow, we've got a good pistol an' a useful knife. What shall we do with him, boss?'

'Tie him up,' said Dick; and the Dago was promptly tied up to a mulga, one arm of his own shirt furnishing the strips with which he was bound.

Dick picked up the revolver and threw open the cylinder. Every shell was empty. The Dago was searched, and not a cartridge was found on him. The revolver was useless, and this was a big disappointment.

'They only let him have one fill of cartridges,' remarked Dick, 'and he's popped 'em all off.'

'Hard luck,' said Jerry; 'even one left might ha' come in very useful.'

The Dago now lifted his voice in a tremendous yell for aid.

'I am catch,' he shouted. 'I am tie to zee tree. Come to help.'

This mournful cry came to the ears of the half-caste and the beach-comber as they scouted round the scrub, wondering what the shots meant.

'They've got him,' said the half-caste. 'I didn't expect anything else.'

The beach-comber nodded. 'No great loss,' he muttered. 'Which way's the wind, Buck?'

'Sou'-west, what there is of it,' replied the other.

'All right,' said Copra Jack; 'then we'll start a fire at the sou'-west corner o' the scrub an' burn 'em out. Ye see, we've got to settle them kids. If we don't, they'll put the Mounted Police after us for borrowin' their outfit, an' we'll be tracked down, dead sure.'

'Fire's the thing,' said the half-caste. 'They must either bolt or be roasted alive. What about the Dago? They've tied him up.'

'Oh, thunder, let him roast with 'em!' replied the beach-comber with brutal coolness. 'I dunno as he's much use to us. There's three horses, see. Well, without him we have one apiece to ride and another to carry the swag; that's about all right, ain't it?'

'Right enough for me,' said the half-caste carelessly. 'I'll start the blaze.'

Five minutes later Dick lifted his head and sniffed.

'Jerry,' he cried sharply, 'they've fired the scrub!'

'My word!' breathed No. 2; and his eyes rounded in horror. Yes, the scrub was fired—the scrub which lay round them, bone-dry and baked, so that no tinder could flare up more swiftly and fiercely, and they knew that the

flames would race through it like a galloping horse. And outside lay cruel and blood-thirsty enemies ready to shoot them down when the torture of the fire should force them into the open.

‘What shall we do?’ said Jerry.

Dick was silent. What could they do?

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE SCRUB-FIRE.

WITHIN two minutes the fearful danger in which the Lone Patrol stood became very evident. The withered scrub burned furiously, and a great bank of smoke came down on the gentle wind. The Dago, fast to his tree, screamed madly and hurled himself to and fro, trying to break his bonds.

‘Cut him loose,’ said Dick. ‘We’ll push on through the scrub a bit, and we can’t leave him here to burn.’

Jerry slashed the captive’s bonds with the Dago’s own knife, and the little man dashed madly into the tangle of bushes and creepers and fought his way forward to escape from the flames.

‘This way,’ said Dick ; and the three Scouts crept through the scrub in a somewhat different direction. Ten minutes’ hard scrambling brought them to the edge of the dense patch, and they looked out, to see the half-caste pace into sight on Whitesock, his eyes searching every inch of the cover.

Dick breathed a sigh of disappointment. He had counted on the cloud of smoke rolling along the ground, and hoped that they might make a dash for liberty under its cover. But the smoke was not rolling along the plain. It swept through the scrub, then lifted a little and went up in a great slanting stream. The desperadoes patrolling the scrub would at once see any one who left its shelter.

They saw the half-caste suddenly touch Whitesock and gallop forward. He had seen a figure bursting out. But at the next moment he checked the little horse and turned, and began to move gently back. It was the Dago, who had

sprung free of the tangle of brushwood, and now tore madly across the plain as if fleeing in wild, senseless terror. The half-caste barely cast his companion a look, but kept his keen eyes on the fringe of low bushes, eager to gain the first glimpse of the real fugitives.

‘No use to go out,’ said Dick. ‘Back into the scrub and scatter. We must search for an open space and try to make it bigger. First who finds an open bit, “Coo-ee!” for the others.’

‘No use to go back to the patch by the cedar-tree, I suppose?’ said Jerry.

‘Not a bit,’ replied Dick; ‘the fire’s too near that. Work forward to the top end of the scrub.’

They turned and dashed back into the thick, interlacing tangle of bushes, vines, creepers, ferns, and trees. Dick pushed towards the centre, Jacky to the right, Jerry to the left, and it was Jerry who raised the ‘Coo-ee!’ Dick and Jacky hurried to the spot, and found Jerry tearing with his naked hands at the bushes around a sandy patch some twenty feet across.

‘As good as we’re likely to get,’ said Dick; and the Scouts attacked the side towards the fire, for there the scrub was thinnest, and began to clear the ground as well as they could. Dick and Jacky had a knife apiece, and they cut and hacked at the bushes and dried stems with all their might, while Jerry dragged them aside and flung them up-wind, where they would do least mischief if the fire caught them.

But the flames came on with terrifying rapidity. They leapt from bush to bush, from tree to tree, and the air was filled with their crackle and roar as they swept nearer and nearer to the Scouts, who were working with the energy of despair.

‘Stick to it,’ cried Dick; ‘we must make the place as big as we can and then lie down in the middle. There’s just a bare chance for us.’

Jerry grunted as if he thought it was pretty bare ; but he worked on like a Trojan, dragging the bushes aside and tearing out others that his comrades had loosened with their knives. The smoke now wrapped them in thick, choking clouds, and the heat was terrific as the power of the scorching flames was added to the blinding glare of the fiery sun. Running with sweat, gasping for breath, the Scouts worked for their lives ; and Dick, glancing round the tiny patch which their utmost efforts had cleared, realised that they were working in vain.

‘No go,’ he said ; ‘the flames are coming on too fast. We’ll never have room enough to dodge ’em. We must push on through the scrub and take our chances of finding a bigger empty patch or of a rush into the open.’

Jerry swung aside a big bush and stood up. He coughed the smoke out of his lungs, eyed the fury of the flames now close at hand, looked coolly round the patch, and nodded.

‘Frizzle us up here like a chop on a billy-lid,’ said he, and turned to go on. But as he turned, his body became suddenly rigid ; then out shot a pointing finger. ‘What’s that?’ he snapped. He was pointing to the quiet, smooth shine of water revealed by the tossing aside of the big bush.

‘A water-hole!’ cried Dick ; ‘a water-hole in the scrub ! How deep?’

Jerry answered the question by making a great spring and landing up to his armpits in the hole, which was about thirty feet across.

‘Good!’ cried Dick. ‘In with you ;’ and the Lone Patrol leapt in and waded to the very centre of the little pool. Here there was a tiny island, and behind this they crouched in water nearly waist-deep. Up swept the roaring fire, and they sank down and threw back their heads so that only their noses were out of water.

Dick and Jerry soaked their hats and held them over their

faces, and Jacky used a small green bush in the same way. But the heat was so tremendous that now and again they had to draw a deep breath and duck right under water for a while.

For fully three-quarters of an hour they crouched thus in the water-hole, and then they were able to stand up and draw a few easy breaths.

'Well,' murmured Jerry, 'of all the luck! If this good little water-hole hadn't turned up it would ha' been a poor lookout for the Kangaroos this time.'

'It would, Jerry!' replied Dick. Then he added sharply, 'What are you going to do?' as Jerry moved.

'Have a peep round an' see how things stand,' replied No. 2.

'No, no,' said Dick. 'Let Jacky do that. 'If that gang is still on the watch for us, your face would show up more than Jacky's. Let him look.'

'My word!' said Jerry, 'an' that's a fact. We've got to remember the yellow nigger. I'll bet he'd soon twig us if we showed signs of life.'

As they stood in the water-hole they could see nothing save the piles of smouldering bushes around the edge of it.

'Look out, Jacky,' said Dick; and the black moved forward, drew himself up a little, and, moving with infinite slowness and caution, raised his head until he could peer round.

'Can you see 'em, Jacky?' whispered Jerry.

'Yohi,' replied Jacky; 'run an' look, run an' look, round an' round.'

'How many?' asked Dick.

Jacky held up three fingers.

'Oh, so the Dago has joined em again,' remarked Dick.—'I say, Jerry, I wonder how they'll account to him for firing the scrub.'

Jerry chuckled and remarked, 'He'd ha' been in a rum fix if we hadn't loosed him.'

‘Rather,’ said Dick.

Outside the burnt scrub the three ruffians had gathered together and were deep in conversation. That is to say, the beach-comber and the half-caste were; the Dago said nothing and did not much more than half-listen, for he was deep in thought. He had asked for no explanation of the firing of the scrub at a time when his comrades knew that he was a prisoner and bound to a tree in the midst of it. The truth was that he needed no explanation. There was no honour among these thieves, and he was well aware of it. After he had got clear of the burning patch and had collected his scattered senses, he recognised the fact that he had been the cat’s-paw of his comrades, and that they had not considered his position in the slightest in their attempt to drive out the Scouts. But he was bound to stick to them at present. In this country, of which he knew so little, he would be utterly lost without their guidance. So he bottled up his wrath, said nothing at all, and fetched Gray Girl, who had been knee-haltered at some distance, and took his share of patrolling and watching the huge bonfire in which the Scouts were shut up.

‘They’re done for; they must be done for,’ said Copra Jack slowly as his keen eyes searched the great burnt patch in every direction.

‘I think so,’ said the half-caste; ‘but we can’t be sure till we’ve searched.’

‘Not worth while to stop,’ said the beach-comber decidedly. ‘Ye must wait hours before ye can venture; the embers are thick an’ all alight, an’ will be for a long time yet. An’ every hour we lose there’s the other two cuttin’ ahead wi’ a good load o’ stuff.’

‘That’s true,’ said the half-caste; ‘and we must pull up when night falls, and wait till morning to get the tracks.’

‘There ye are!’ rejoined the leader; ‘an’ while we’re campin’ they may be drivin’ along all night an’ gettin’ clean

out o' reach. A bird in hand for me. We'll give one good look round, an' then pack the swag an' start.'

Riding together, the beach-comber and the half-caste took a turn about the blackened waste of smouldering branches and trees and watched closely for any sign of the prey they had so closely pursued. To the eye all appeared clear and open. A number of the larger trees still stood, bare, scorched trunks; but the brushwood, that which had formed the real hiding-places of the scrub, lay flat in ashes or held up thin blackened stems which could conceal nothing. The eye ranged from side to side, and it seemed impossible for any living creature to be hidden, even supposing that the all-searching fire had left it unscathed. Nor would it have been possible had it not been for the water-hole hidden in a little hollow of the scrub, in which the bodies of the scouts were concealed and the little heaps of burnt ashes which masked their heads.

Keenly as the half-caste surveyed the scene, there were eyes just as keen watching him, and soon Jacky reported that the three ruffians were riding away towards the camp.

Dick and Jerry now raised themselves cautiously to peer, and saw the horsemen vanish in a dip of the plain, rise on the other slope, and canter steadily towards the creek. Now that the scrub was burnt they could see right across to the spot where their camp was pitched, and they watched the beach-comber and his comrades busily packing the swag. Within half-an-hour the thieves got to horse and rode away on the track of Sam Hardacre and his mate.

'Reg'lar bushrangers, that lot,' said Jerry, gritting his teeth savagely as he saw Copra Jack drop a stick across Dandy's quarters and force the game little horse into a wild gallop.

As for Dick, his heart was too full of grief and anger to speak. There was his own Whitesock, whom no one but he had ever ridden, carrying the half-caste swiftly and easily to

another deed of robbery and very likely murder. Would he ever see his gallant little black again? Who could say?

The robbers disappeared over a ridge; but the Kangaroos did not move. Two miles beyond, a second ridge rose against the sky, and they waited until they saw three mounted figures climb it, stand for a second clear against the sky-line, and finally vanish.

'They've clean gone,' said Dick. 'We'll get out of this.'

Jacky cut a stout stick, part of an unburnt sapling, and began to toss the smouldering embers aside to make a path by which they could win their way through the burnt scrub. Dick and Jerry filled their hats at the water-hole and tossed the water on places where heaps of cinders still lay red-hot, and working in this way they gained the open ground in less than an hour.

Scorched, blackened, covered with cinders and dust, the Scouts broke into a trot and made for their camp.

'Well, we're alive an' kickin',' said Jerry, 'an' I reckon that's somethin'.'

'It is, Jerry; it's everything,' replied Dick. 'If you hadn't found that water-hole we'd have been wiped clean out.'

'Can't wipe out the Lone Patrol quite so easy as all that,' chuckled Jerry.

CHAPTER XLV.

A SCOUT'S JOB.

THEY soon gained the camp ; but, as Jerry said, it was as bare as a bone when a dingo leaves it. Everything had gone ; but a ring of black ashes, undisturbed, lay upon the hole whence they had dug out the gold.

‘My word, Dick!’ said Jerry, ‘that was a great idea o’ yours about buildin’ a fire over the gold-mine. They’d ha’ been diggin’ in there by now if they’d seen the loose dirt.’

‘They would,’ said Dick. ‘We stood ’em off there at any rate ; though it’s very little good to us at present.’

It was not. There they stood, the Lone Patrol, robbed of their horses, their food, their outfit in every shape and form. They were stripped almost naked, in a wild country which might at any moment launch a mob of hostile blacks upon them, a danger which they could laugh at with a good horse between the knees ; but they were now afoot and unarmed, save for a knife or two and an empty, useless pistol. Dick had stuck the latter in his belt, and there it remained.

‘Reg’lar dead-finish, this is,’ remarked Jerry. ‘Seems to me it’s a great chance to carry out one o’ them rules—that one as says ye’ve got to whistle an’ look happy when ye’re in a fix.’

Dick smiled and nodded. ‘We’re bound to buck up and do our best, Jerry ; we’re Boy Scouts.’

‘We are,’ said Jerry ; ‘an’ fust thing I’m goin’ to scout round for is some tucker. I’m yawnin’ under my belt.’

While they were talking Jacky had disappeared, and now he came running into sight. He had been to fetch the shirt

and trousers he had stripped off to play the part of a wild buck, and he brought with him his tomahawk, which he had hidden away with them—a very useful addition to their meagre stock of weapons.

‘You two clear out and find something to eat,’ said Dick, ‘and I’ll make a fire.’

Their present position was one in which tender feet would have been utterly hopeless and helpless, but these young bushmen could live on the wilderness as well as a jackeroo would manage with a row of well-filled shops and a pocket full of money. Jerry took Jacky’s knife, cut himself a couple of throwing-sticks, and started for the water-hole where they had been fishing when they saw Sam.

He had seen a flock of little white geese in a corner of it, and hoped to fetch one or two down. Jacky took the tomahawk and went in search of ‘possums.

When Jerry came to the water-hole, he saw the flock sailing about in the very centre, quite out of reach, so he scratched his lean jaw and looked round for something else. Not far away was a reedy corner where the water was thick with lily-pads. Jerry’s quick eye caught a movement among the pads, and he crept there softly. Suddenly a queer little, snake-like head popped above water, then vanished. Jerry gave a satisfied nod, stripped off his clothes, and waded very gently into the pool. It was a river-turtle which had bobbed its head into sight, and it was feeding on the tender shoots. Jerry waded in breast-deep, stood perfectly still, and waited. Soon the pads began to move again close at hand, and out bobbed a head. With finger and thumb Jerry dexterously flipped water at the turtle’s head, and down it went. Then Jerry moved forward, raised his right foot, and brought it down as sharply as he could.

‘Got him!’ said Jerry as he felt the turtle squirming under his foot. The river-turtle when alarmed sinks to the bottom like a stone, and Jerry, knowing its ways, was

ready to pin it down. Now he bent down, seized the turtle, killed it, and tossed it on the bank, and waited for another.

Meanwhile Dick was at work on the fire. He had not a single match, for the bushrangers had carried them off, so he fetched a 'fire-stick' from the smouldering scrub, and soon had a good blaze going. He fed it carefully with small, dried sticks in order to have a good bed of ashes in which to cook anything the hunters might bring back.

Jacky was back first with a couple of 'possums, and Dick cleaned one of them and set it to roast, leaving the other to the blackboy. Then Jerry appeared with three river-turtles, which he carried in his shirt. One of the sleeves, also, was knotted at the wrist, forming a bag, and in this bag was stowed away two or three score of tiny eggs; he had come across a small colony of pigeons'-nests.

With these supplies and water from the pool near at hand, the Lone Patrol made a good meal, and while it was eaten they discussed future movements.

'What's our best dart now?' said Jerry.

Dick was silent for a moment, and Jerry went on: 'Seems to me pretty plain. We'd best peg straight ahead for this new rush, get hold o' your father an' M'Lean, come back here, an' go in for a bit o' gold-diggin'. We might knock out a little fortune an' live happy ever after, as the sayin' goes.'

'No, Jerry,' said Dick quietly.

'I don't see why not,' replied No. 2. 'If we can't hit that new rush, an' live on the country as we go, I'm a trifle out in my reck'nin'.'

'Oh, that would be easy enough,' said Dick.

'Then why can't we do it?'

'Because we're Boy Scouts.'

Jerry looked puzzled for a moment, then scratched his jaw and looked sharply across at Dick. He had divined his leader's meaning.

'I'm thinking of Sam and his mate,' said Dick.

'I see ye are,' replied the corporal of the Kangaroos. 'Ye reckon we ought to follow up old Copra an' his push, an' see they don't bag Sam Hardacre an' Joe.'

'I do,' said Dick. 'Just think how they stand! They're on foot, an' the bushrangers are following upon our nags, three right-down good ones. With the yellow buck to guide 'em they'll come on Sam an' his mate without the least warning, and it'll be all over with the diggers in no time.'

Jerry nodded as if he quite agreed, and stared into the fire. Then he glanced up and said quickly, 'Look here, Dick; I've got a fancy that Sam an' his mate had a pretty fair notion that they were bein' followed.'

'So have I,' said Dick. 'I've been thinking about it, and I'm pretty sure of it. Half-a-dozen things point that way as straight as can be.'

'Well, d'ye reckon they played the fair game by us when they cut along an' never said a word as to who might turn up along the track?'

'No, I don't,' replied Dick; 'but what's that got to do with it?'

'A goodish bit, it seems to me,' replied Jerry. 'If they'd passed us the tip, we shouldn't ha' been drawn in by an old swaggy an' landed in this mess. Here we are, horses gone, almost everythin' gone. Why should we start after that lot, who'd shoot us same as if we were dingos, to save Sam, who never told us a word about the danger?'

'Same old reason, Jerry,' returned the leader. 'We're Boy Scouts. We've either got to play the game or leave it alone. And as I see it, it wouldn't be playing the game to push ahead and leave Sam and his mate to 'em, even if Sam did keep his mouth shut about the chance of Copra Jack and his gang turning up.'

'Oh, all right,' said Jerry. 'If it's a Scout's job, I'm on.'

'It is a Scout's job, and no mistake,' returned the patrol-leader; 'and a pretty tough one, my son!'

'You're hittin' the facts every time, boss,' murmured the corporal, and put forward a fresh query: 'But what are ye goin' to do? We can all move a bit, but it's a trifle steep to run down three good nags with a good start.'

'I've been thinking that over,' said Dick; 'and the only chance for us to overhaul 'em is this. The diggers followed a horse-track. Sam and his mate and the bushrangers are bound to follow the same track down. Now, I've been working over the road in my mind, and I reckon it makes a big sweep round the nose of that spur.'

He pointed southwards to a lofty ridge which threw great cliffs of basalt high in the air.

Jerry nodded and considered. 'Yes, I fancy you're right, Dick,' he remarked; 'but it's goin' to be a big job to get over that ridge.'

'I don't know that we can get over it,' said the patrol-leader. 'There may be no chance of finding a track. There may be big gullies nobody can cross; but if we have a go at it we shall have done all we can, and I reckon we're bound to try.'

'There's a moon,' said Jerry; 'if the ground's open we can march by that.'

Jacky was taken into consultation, and he too was quite of opinion that if the great ridge could be crossed they would cut square into the diggers' trail and have a chance of heading the bushrangers.

'Come on,' said Dick; 'we'll do as much as we can before sundown.'

They had no means of carrying water; so each took a draught at the water-hole, and then lay down in it at a point where it was shallow and allowed the water to soak his clothes and enter the pores of his skin. This is a good preventive against thirst, and when the Scouts sprang to the bank and had cut three stout sticks from a bunch of saplings, they had made the whole of their very slender preparations for a difficult and dangerous journey.

Jerry chuckled as he trimmed his staff. 'I reckon that nag had plenty o' horse-sense,' said he—'the nag that put his foot into Copra's face. He knew a bad man when he saw him, that nag did.'

'Yes, he's a dangerous bird,' said Dick. 'Jerry, don't you think that heap of ashes over our gold-mine looks very natural?'

'Looks first-rate,' replied No. 2. 'Nobody 'ud ever dream it was anythin' but a camp-fire, an' there's a-plenty o' them about.'

Dick gave the word to march, and off they went at a long, swinging stride. So the Lone Patrol, burnt and blackened and tattered, robbed and plundered of almost all they owned, turned their backs upon the safe and easy trail, and turned their faces to a hard, long climb over wild country, with at the end a possible encounter with a desperate and murderous band. But it was all in the day's work, and the three Kangaroos, staff in hand, struck across the sandy plain resolved to give the best account they could of themselves against the ruffians.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PURSUIT.

THE fall of night found them far up the ridge but short of its summit. It had been a severe climb, for of course track there was none. The three Scouts had threaded gullies, climbed precipitous slopes, leapt from boulder to boulder across broken ravines, worked their way through dense scrub, and at last they came out on the higher slopes almost naked of trees and composed of huge shelving sweeps of bare rock. The heat was terrific. The sun as it sank seemed as fiery as at noonday, and they were glad to see it fall behind the distant rim of the plain, and to draw a few breaths of the evening air. The moon would be up an hour after sunset, and they stretched themselves on the earth to rest while they awaited it. It rose, and they continued the march. They talked very little, for their mouths were parched and their tongues dry. The clear, roasting heat of the afternoon seemed to have dried out of their bodies every drop of the moisture they had stored before leaving the water-hole, and they had found no water about the ridge. Given ample time to search, the young bushmen might have hit upon water in several ways; but they had no time to spare, and they tramped on, dry and uncomplaining.

Two hours' steady climbing after moonrise brought them to the top of the ridge, and looking south, they saw dim glimpses of a vast plain spreading away from the fringe of trees at the foot of the descent far below.

Dick pointed to the dark line of scrub, clearly to be made out as it crossed the burnt, arid land which shone out brightly in the moonlight.

'If I've hit the line off anywhere near right,' said the

leader, 'the track lies about half a mile outside that scrub.'

'All right,' said Jerry; 'we'll go down an' see.'

But they were not to go down so easily as it seemed. For half-an-hour they worked their way steadily across a boulder-strewn declivity; then the light of the moon began to fail. Flying wisps of mist were drawing across her face, and soon a great solid bank of cloud came over and the night turned as black as pitch. Dick halted the patrol at once.

'No use going on till it clears,' he said. 'One of us might go over the edge of a big drop and get knocked to smithereens.'

Weary and parched with thirst, they dropped where they stood.

'You two go to sleep,' said Dick; 'I'll take the watch.'

'What is there to watch?' asked Jerry. 'Nobody's likely to run against us on this forsaken old mountain.'

'Watch for the moon to clear,' said Dick. 'If it does we can go ahead.'

'Ah yes,' said Jerry, and yawned. The invitation to sleep was very tempting.

'Mine thinkit take first watch,' said Jacky.

'No,' said Dick; 'I'll call one of you at the right time. Turn in.'

So they turned in, and this consisted in stretching themselves on the hot, dry sand in lee of a big boulder and dropping at once into a deep slumber. Dick sat down, leant his back against the boulder, and watched the sky, now and again taking a turn of a yard or two and looking on every hand.

The heat was suffocating. The banked-up clouds seemed to shut in the heat of the day upon the ridge, and Dick, seasoned as he was, felt it severely. His thirst was great, and he sucked a pebble for relief. On one of his turns,

towards the close of his watch, his eye was caught by a tiny twinkle of light on the plain far below. It was but a flash and then gone; nor was it seen again, though he remained for a long while with his eyes fixed on the spot.

At the end of two hours and a half Jacky woke as exactly as if he had set an alarm-clock.

‘Mine thinkit time to watch now,’ he said.

‘All right, Jacky,’ said Dick. ‘Wake me at once if you see the sky clear; and, Jacky, keep a watch down there;’ and Dick pointed to the plain. ‘I have seen something that looked like a fire-stick.’

‘Mine watch everything,’ replied Jacky; and Dick went to sleep, knowing that the blackboy would be as good as his word.

‘Nerangi daylight, boss,’ said a voice in Dick’s ear; and Dick woke and sprang up, to find that Jerry had gone on guard; that the night was spent and the day was close at hand. Thick clouds still veiled the sky, and farther night-march had been quite impossible. A faint, gray light was creeping over the ridge, and in the early dawn the Scouts resumed their march. Within two hundred yards they saw how wise had been Dick’s command to halt. A yawning chasm opened directly across the line they had been following, and they had to make a great detour to turn it.

Three hours’ hard work carried them to the foot of the ridge, and as they went they kept a sharp eye open for the presence of water. They found none, though their need was great. By this time the clouds had been swept away and the sky contained nothing save that terrible ball of fire, the sun, whose rays were of tremendous power. They gained the strip of scrub, and here they separated, for if water were to be found anywhere it would be here, and water they must have to enable them to push forward on their quest.

It was Dick who found the water. As he pushed through

the scrub he saw a tiny flock of diamond sparrows flit from the heart of a bushy clump. He ran there at once, parted the bushes with his staff, and discovered a tiny well. Had not the little birds guided him, he might have searched all day and not discovered the tiny basin filled with the precious liquid.

He did not 'Coo-ee!' though that was the patrol-call and the natural call of a bushman—for the sound might reach the wrong ears—but raised the dingo bark, which would fetch his comrades to his side. They joined him in a twinkling, and Jerry's dry mouth gaped into a broad smile when he saw the tiny pool at which the diamond sparrows had been drinking.

Now the Scouts drank very, very slowly, each taking a mouthful of water and letting it soak into him, rather than gulping it down, and soon they felt much refreshed and went on through the scrub.

They halted on the edge of it, and Dick advanced alone to reconnoitre. If the bushrangers had not passed they might come in sight at any moment, and the half-caste's eye for a certainty would miss nothing.

So the patrol-leader glided forward, taking advantage of every scrap of cover until he was near the point where the track should cross the plain. Thirty yards away he saw it and paused. Yes, they were right; they had taken a true line and hit full upon it. But how was he to examine it? To go straight up to it would never do. His tracks might be seen and a warning given that he did not wish to give.

Dick glanced up and down. Fifty yards away the trail skirted the point of a tongue of scrub running out into the open, and a low mulga-tree stretched its branches across the path. Into the scrub stepped Dick at once, worked his way up to the point, swarmed up the mulga, and crept along a branch. He dropped flat on it and

looked eagerly at the track below. With the first glance he flung every precaution to the winds; they were needless, and had been needless for some time. He swung himself off the branch, dropped into the track, and waved his hand for the others to come on. Jerry and the blackboy ran up at once.

'They've passed,' cried Dick—'passed hours ago. See, that's Whitesock; he was being led. Here's Dandy, and here's Gray Girl; they were being ridden; their tracks are much sharper. And here's a man's track. That was the yellow buck working on foot. Now I know what the flash of light meant. He was tracking by feel, and struck a match once to make sure.'

'Yes,' said Jerry; 'an' these tracks mixed in with the new uns belong to Sam an' his mate an' their horse.'

The three Scouts read the easy bunch of signs and knew that the enemy had headed them on this stage of the pursuit; the grim, beetling ridge, the pitch-black darkness, had cost them precious hours, which Copra Jack and his accomplices had made use of.

'My word! they're hot on the track,' said Jerry. 'They've pegged along all night, by the look o' things. They're dead-keen on nobblin' that gold.'

'Forward!' said Dick, seizing his staff from the hand of Jacky, with whom he had left it while he crept forward. 'We may be up in time to lend a hand yet. In any case, we can't turn back now.'

'Must see it out,' said No. 2; and they broke into a loping trot and ran along the trail, careless of the burning sun, careless of the hunger which gnawed them, thankful for the water which had slaked their most cruel need, and eager to do their duty as Boy Scouts and good bushmen.

They moved fast, but with the utmost precaution. Dick went ahead, and he carefully examined every point where the trail wound through scrub or dipped into gullies, lest

they should come too suddenly upon the men whom they followed.

An hour's running brought them to a spot where they found the still warm embers of a camp-fire, and around it and in the neighbourhood a very interesting medley of tracks, which took a little picking up; but the threads were soon in the hands of these skilful trackers and the skein untangled. Dick took the line of two unmounted men and ran it here and there about the camp. Jerry found a place where their own horses had been led into a little gully and there watched by one man. Jacky studied the marks round the fire. Then they came together and Dick gathered up the threads.

'Mine thinkit Sam's fire,' said Jacky. 'Stop here all night, then yan burraburri [go on quickly].'

'Were they frightened, Jacky?' asked Dick.

'Baal [no],' replied the black; 'only be quick.'

'They'd been hookin' it mighty sharp all the time,' remarked Jerry.

Dick nodded. 'It all seems pretty clear,' said the leader. 'Copra Jack and the others came up before Sam and Joe started. The Dago was left with the horses, and the other two prowled about the camp, very likely looking for a chance to rush it. They didn't find one; p'raps either Sam or Joe was on the watch all the time. So they've let Sam and Joe get a start again and they're following, ready to take the first chance of bailing 'em up.'

The Scouts pressed forward faster still. They knew that the two parties were now in contact, and that the advantages were terribly against the honest men. For the movements of the gold-diggers told plainly that they were not aware how closely the bushrangers were dodging them, and in the broken and scrubby country upon which the trail now entered there would be a hundred places where the cunning rogues could bail up their victims.

Within half-an-hour there was a striking development. Suddenly the track was bare of all signs save those left by the gold-diggers. The trail of Whitesock, Dandy, and Gray Girl broke away to the left and vanished behind a clump of gum-bush.

'Let 'em go,' said Dick curtly, as Jacky gave a grunt and Jerry pulled up; 'we'll keep straight ahead.'

They went a couple of miles; then Dick himself paused suddenly. 'Just as I expected,' he said. 'Bailed up!'

He had halted on the edge of a dusty patch marked by many tracks. His two comrades formed up beside him, and the riddle of the dust was swiftly read.

'That's where they waited for 'em,' said Dick, pointing to a huge fallen cedar which lay beside the way.

'No fight,' said Jacky, examining the tracks closely.

'Not a bit of it,' replied Dick; 'it was a clean stick-up. Sam and Joe had no warning.'

Jerry glanced ahead. There were no signs of footmarks or hoof-marks beyond the place where they stood; the trail turned abruptly aside.

'They've taken 'em into the scrub,' said Dick gravely.

'Bad sign,' remarked Jerry; then he added in a low voice, 'Dead men tell no tales.'

Forty yards away were the first trees of a dismal patch of lignum scrub, and the trail ran straight into it. Dick made a gesture and the Scouts moved forward, now going with the utmost wariness, for these murderous men might be close at hand, and they feared that the depths of that gloomy scrub would reveal some dreadful horror.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE DIGGERS' FLIGHT.

THE trail of the bushrangers and their captives ran straight through the scattered lignum-trees and entered a desolate stretch of country, which in the rainy season was a clay-pan swamp. Now the earth was baked and seamed and scored by the parching sun, and nothing stirred on its surface save a dancing, shimmering, heat haze, which struck into the faces of the Scouts like a blast from a furnace.

'Bit hotter still here,' murmured Jerry ; and Dick nodded, his keen eyes now bent on the track, now searching the dreary waste ahead for signs of the enemy. Marching thus, with the utmost care, they had gone a mile or more when Dick gave a tiny hiss. Upon the sound all dropped flat and lay without moving. The leader had seen figures lying on the earth a short distance before them, and could not make out for the moment how matters stood. Jerry and the black now lay perfectly still, while Dick crept half-a-dozen yards farther to get a better view. Peering through a tangle of creepers, he looked into an open space some thirty yards across, and saw two men lying flat on their backs full in the rays of the sun. He recognised them at once, and a low cry of horror and surprise came to his lips.

'My Colonial, spread-eagled in this sun !' said Dick ; and he sprang to his feet and ran forward. His companions were up with him in a moment, and the three Scouts hurried to the bodies of Sam and Joe ; for they had found the gold-diggers.

The unfortunate men were in a most terrible plight. The bushrangers had dealt them neither blow nor bullet,

but had left them to a fate a thousand times more exquisitely painful. Each man had been flung flat on his back, and his wrists and ankles secured by cords to four stout pegs driven into the firm clayey soil. Thus they had been left to die, and then to parch and wither in the burning sun. Knives were whipped out and the cords were severed at once. Both men were already insensible, and their deaths would have been a matter of but a short time had not the Kangaroos found them.

'Over there,' said Dick, nodding to a thick-growing patch of coarse reeds where a little shade could be had; and the gold-diggers were carried across and laid down in it.

'They're in a frightful state,' said Jerry; and his words were true enough. Their faces were purple, their tongues swollen and protruding, their breathing thick and stertorous.

'Water,' said Dick. 'Water we must have or it will be all over with them in no time.'

There is generally water in a clay-pan country for those who know how to look for it, though, unluckily, when found it is sometimes far too salt to drink.

'Point the sticks,' commanded Dick; and knives and tomahawk went to work to sharpen their strong staves.

'We passed a "water-pot" on the road not three hundred yards back,' said the leader; and back they went at a run.

The 'water-pot' belied its name, if looks went for anything. It was a bed of baked, cracked soil like the rest, with a growth of coarse, rush-like grass upon it. But there is often drinkable water at the roots of this grass, and the Scouts began to dig with all their might. At the bottom of a hole three feet deep they struck water, and soon a muddy pool of fairly sweet water had formed. Filling their hats, they turned back to the poor fellows who had undergone such awful suffering, and set to work to pull them round again; dropping water on their tongues, bathing their faces and wrists, and flinging water on their bodies,

in order that it might enter at the pores of the parched skin. Dick and Jerry undertook this work, and the black acted as water-carrier. Within an hour Sam opened his eyes, and he knew them at once. He tried to speak, but could not.

'Steady on, Sam,' said Dick. 'Just suck the water in and keep quiet. You'll pull round before long.'

Sam's tongue was soon back in his mouth, and he was able to drink a little, and when he had reached this stage he progressed rapidly. Joe was much slower; but he was also on the road to restoration.

'My word!' said Jerry, 'we'll see 'em right yet. But, I say, Dick, if we hadn't come along pretty soon it 'ud ha' been all over with the poor chaps. Pegged out full in the sun! They'd had a frightful time of it before they lost their senses.'

'They had, Jerry,' replied Dick. 'Those robbers are as bad a gang as ever I heard of.'

'An' they've cleared off with every blessed thing,' said Jerry—'ours an' theirs;' and he nodded to the prostrate men and heaved a sigh.

Dick looked up. 'Jacky,' he said, 'go and get something to eat.'

He spoke as calmly as if there were well-stuffed tucker-bags within easy reach instead of a howling desert all round; and Jacky took the command just as coolly. He seized his tomahawk and vanished into the scrub.

'Good idea,' murmured Jerry; 'I feel as empty as a dry water-bag. It's been a tidy bit, an' we've done a thing or two since we had a bite.'

'You go on with the water and get those chaps into shape,' said Dick, 'and I'll light a fire ready to cook whatever Jacky brings back.'

They had neither fire-stick—the burning brand which blacks carry from one fire to another—nor matches; but

Dick was independent of both. He took his knife and went to a patch of dried and fallen brushwood, and soon found what he wanted.

First he cut a hard-wood stick and pointed it, then searched for a stick of softer wood and cut a broad end on it. In this broad end he worked a hollow with the point of his knife, a hollow into which the pointed end of the other stick fitted. At the side of the hollow he cut a nick, and in this nick he tucked a little bunch of dried grass.

Now he squatted on the ground, and held the soft-wood stick down with his feet, black-fellow fashion. The hard-wood stick was held upright between the palms of his open hands, the point fitted in the hollow. Dick next began to twirl the stick at great speed, and so dexterously did he handle these simple implements that before very long the soft-wood stick began to smoke, and then a spark of fire appeared. Dick gently blew the spark and the tiny tuft of dried grass was kindled. It burst into flame, and Dick held a bunch of twigs over it and the twigs blazed up. From this flare he lighted a withered branch and had a fire-stick, which he carried across and thrust into a pile of dried sticks, and his fire was going in no time.

Jacky was back in less than an hour, bringing with him a couple of big, black rock-lizards and a great carpet-snake, which trailed behind him like a piece of thick rope. He had settled all three with his trusty tomahawk, flinging it at them as they lay basking in the sun.

The lizards were rather revolting-looking beasts with their thorny hides and their general air of tiny alligators; but Jerry smacked his lips at sight of them, and, in his capacity of cook, sprang to take them from Jacky. He roasted them deftly, and to the hungry Scouts the flesh, white and tender as chicken, made a delicious feast. Jacky tucked in about three feet of the carpet-snake.

By the time they had finished their meal Sam Hardacre was able to talk with them, and he poured forth a flood of thanks for their pluck and kindness in following up and releasing him and his mate at so critical a moment.

'We had no chance agin' the villains,' said Sam. 'Copra Jack an' the nigger jumped up from behind a big cedar an' covered us dead. "Bail up," shouted Copra, "or we'll let daylight through ye!" We'd no idea they could be in front o' us. Well, we put up our hands, for there was nought else to do. Then the Buck whistled, an' up came the Dago with the horses—your horses—an' I can tell ye I felt mightily sorry to see 'em. I reckoned they'd jumped your camp an' put you through. Well, they brought us along here an' then pegged us out. It was old Copra Jack as proposed it. He said it 'ud give us time to think about the lot o' trouble we'd given to 'em to catch us. Joe, there, begged an' prayed 'em before they went to put a bullet through his head an' end it quicker; but they only laughed an' left us to it. I reckon he'll be quite satisfied he didn't get the bullet he begged for,' added Sam. 'He didn't know there were such good plucked uns as you on the trail.'

'I wonder where they're making for?' said Dick.

'I can tell ye,' replied Sam. 'They talked freely over their next move straight afore us arter we were pegged out. They reckoned us dead men then, ye see! They're makin' south for Bunya River, an' when they get within easy reach o' the settlements they'll shoot the horses, buy new ones, an' pass as diggers workin' towards home wi' their swags.'

Jerry cried out, in anger at this talk of shooting the horses; but Dick said nothing, only nodded a trifle grimly and considered. Nor did he add a word as Jerry ran over the story of their encounter with the bushrangers, but seemed deep in thought all the time. At last he looked up and said, 'Well, Sam, you seem a lot better. I fancy you can look after

yourself and Joe now. There's a lot of carpet-snake and lizard to cook and plenty of water to drink. You'll be all right for a bit.'

'Why, where are you goin'?' cried the astonished Sam.

'To follow on,' said Dick. 'I don't reckon I've brought Whitesock up since he was foaled to let any beach-comber shoot him without a good try to fetch him clear.'

'Same here!' cried Jerry. 'Shoot my old Dandy! The scoundrel ought to be shot himself.'

'Don't do it, Dick,' protested Sam earnestly. 'They're well armed. They'd got a revolver apiece, and now they've got mine an' Joe's as well, an' about sixty cartridges we'd got between us. An' the Dago's got Joe's knife.'

'No chance of a cartridge left, I suppose?' said Dick.

'Not one; they stripped us clean,' replied Sam.

'Pity,' said the patrol-leader, 'for I've got a revolver here, but it's empty. It's a .450 Colt;' and he drew from his belt the pistol taken from the Dago.

'But they're all mounted,' protested Sam. 'You don't mean to say you can run 'em down on foot?'

'Easily enough,' replied Dick. 'They won't hurry now. They reckon there's a clear road ahead of 'em. They'll think we were settled in the fire and you in the clay-pan here. They'll never dream of pursuit. Besides, they've been pushing after you all night. I'll warrant they won't go five miles more without camping and having a rest. Oh, we'll get up to 'em easily.'

'An' what are ye goin' to do when ye get up,' said Sam, 'wi' nothin' much but your bare fists agin' that push?'

'I don't know what we're going to do,' replied Dick. 'We'll have to settle that according to how things pan out. It might happen they weren't watching the horses closely, and heaps of things.'

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

TEN minutes later the scouts were once more on the march. They followed the trail closely, and within a mile Dick's prophecy that the bushrangers would take things easily was proved true. The horses from a hard gallop had fallen to a walk, and about four miles from the clay-pan swamp the patrol pulled up as one man. They cleared a patch of scrub, to see a thin wisp of smoke rising in the air at some distance in front.

'They are there,' said Dick, 'or they have been. You stay here. I'll soon settle which it is.'

He swung away to the right and moved on a track which swept in a wide semicircle round the tiny column of smoke. At the farther end of the semicircle he cut recent tracks going away. He looked at them and knew them for the hoofprints of the four horses, and saw that the robbers had left the fire. He came back along the tracks, and found a dying fire beside a warrigals' well. He raised a gentle 'Coo-ee!' and his comrades came running up.

'Just as I thought,' said Dick; 'they camped at the first water they came to, cooked some tucker, and took a rest. They left here less than an hour ago.'

'See what it means,' said Jerry; 'the Buck knows this country like the back o' his hand. He guided them to this well, an' he'll take 'em on to the next, an' there they'll stop for the night. We'll catch 'em at that.'

'Mine thinkit Sam's horse gone little bit lame,' said Jacky, who had been poring over the tracks.

'Think so, Jacky?' cried Dick eagerly, and sprang to examine the prints afresh.

‘Yes, Jacky; you’re right. My Colonial! you’ve wiped my eye this time! Sure enough, he’s a trifle lame in the near fore-foot, and I’d never twigged it.’

‘That’s one to us,’ cried Jerry. ‘He can’t move fast, an’ that means our beauties won’t carry the rascals out o’ reach. I’ll bet they’ll stick close to Sam’s nag, for the gold is pretty sure to be packed on him.’

‘There’s not much wrong with him at present,’ said Dick, running the tracks some twenty or thirty yards; ‘but if it goes worse we might be up with them sooner than we think, so we must move carefully.’

They took up the trail once more, and ran it clean out of the clay-pan country up to and over a low ridge, beyond which was a stretch of broken and rocky plain, difficult travelling for horses, but easy enough for the tough, wiry Scouts. The Lone Patrol now found the advantage of their enforced rest of the night. The short sleep they had then, the water they had drunk, and the lizard and snake flesh they had eaten had refreshed their hardy frames; so that they pressed forward on the prints of the bushrangers like sleuth-hounds on a hot scent.

Soon they were exercising the greatest care, for they knew that Copra Jack and his accomplices were not far ahead. The rough, hard travelling had badly affected Sam’s horse, and they saw that it was becoming much lamer and moving with greater difficulty. Then the going changed to sand, and the poor beast seemed to get on a little better.

Suddenly from cover of a patch of mulga they saw the foe. Beyond the scattered mulga scrub a plain full five miles across ran to a line of tall timber, and half-way between them and the timber a small cavalcade moved slowly across the plain.

‘There they are! There they are!’ breathed Jerry; and Dick nodded, and Jacky’s eyes flashed like fire.

‘There’s water over there,’ said Dick. ‘Those are creek

gums, and, with that lame nag, they'll camp there to-night. I don't think we'll march over this plain behind 'em. We'll rest a bit till they're in the timber.'

The Scouts lay down in the shade of the mulga-bushes, and watched the bushrangers creep across the level flat until the line of horsemen had disappeared among the trees.

'Now we'll start and work towards that timber,' said Dick, 'but not straight across. That yellow buck's got eyes in the back of his head, the same as Jacky.'

The blackboy grinned, and pointed away to the left. 'Mine thinkit big gully down there,' he said; and Dick scanned the surface of the plain and remarked that he was of the same opinion.

The Lone Patrol moved through the scrub towards the point which Jacky had indicated, and soon hit upon a deep, narrow gully filled with palms and ferns. It was now dry, but was clearly the bed of a tributary creek; and, hidden in its ample cover, they moved down towards the point where it ran into the main stream. It was hard work pushing through the jungle in the creek-bottom, and it took a good two hours and a half before they came into the timber line. This was just as Dick had said, a great avenue of stately white gums lining the course of a big creek, in which there was plenty of well-filled water-holes.

'Good!' said Jerry softly; 'those rogues up above will never shift from here to-night. It's a camping-place of a thousand.'

'Ssh!' Dick held up a finger. They listened and plainly made out the sound of distant voices. The Scouts looked at each other with eager eyes. Two men were shouting at straying horses. Their enemies had camped, and the horses were turned out to feed.

'We ought to get our nags to-night,' whispered Dick. 'They don't reckon there's a living soul within many a mile. After dark we'll creep up and crawl round the camp. The

horses are bound to stray a bit while feeding. Once we get our hands on 'em, we'll cut the hobbles, jump on horseback, and off we go—anywhere; it doesn't matter where. The horses will stick well together, and as long as we get away from the camp, that's all we want.'

The others nodded agreement. Yes, that was all they wanted for a start—to get the horses away from that dangerous and well-armed camp. Further moves could be discussed later.

Half-an-hour before the dark the Lone Patrol moved out of its lair in a thicket of huge ferns, and began to go very carefully up the bank of the creek. They wished to look over the ground before darkness fell, so that they might not make any fatal blunder when the time came to carry off their horses.

Presently they all sniffed. The scent of wood-smoke was gently floating down to them; that was the camp-fire. The level rays of the sinking sun were darting along the wide creek-bed as they gained a little knoll covered with a dense thicket of bamboo-trees. From this excellent cover they found they could see the camp, and what they saw was a very unpleasing sight. Jerry had been quite right in saying that the yellow buck knew this country like the back of his hand, and he had chosen a splendid site for a camp. The creek wound about a small grassy flat, and almost encircled it with steep, precipitous banks. Upon this little peninsula the horses were grazing, and in the very midst of the narrow neck which led to the open the camp-fire blazed. The horses could not be guarded more securely had they been in a locked stable.

At a glance the Boy Scouts took in the situation and looked a trifle blankly at each other.

'My word!' breathed Jerry; 'the nags are as good as yarded. What's our best dart now?'

Dick bit his lips and looked closely over the ground. He

made no answer, for he knew not what to say. They could get at the horses easily by climbing the steep bank on the farther side; but how could they get them away? There was only one road from the little flat, and that was guarded by the fire and well-armed men.

He turned his gaze to the fire. The half-caste was standing idly beside it, casting a glance now and again at the grazing horses. It was useless to dream of evading his vigilance, and Dick knew that. No sign could be seen of the beach-comber and the Dago.

Suddenly there rang out, not far away, the sound of a shot. In the evening silence it rolled and re-echoed as if some one had fired a little cannon; but Dick knew it for the bark of a heavy revolver.

Dick glanced towards the fire. The half-caste had raised his head at sound of the shot, and for a moment seemed to listen as if for a second. But as the silence remained unbroken his head fell again, and he glanced now at the fire, now at the grazing horses.

'We'll see what that shot means,' breathed Dick; and the Scouts slid through the reeds and worked towards the place where the revolver had been fired. The only man whose bushcraft they feared was safe beside the fire, and they could work round and round the other two without either having the least notion that a living creature was in the neighbourhood.

The evening light was fast fading amid the tall trees when they came to a small billabong which, by its direction, spread out from the creek a little above the bushrangers' camp. The billabong was dry, and right in the middle of its grassy floor lay a body stretched out flat on its back.

'It's the Dago,' whispered Jerry.

The Scouts crept up and saw that it was indeed the Dago. He lay there with a frightful wound in his head. He had been shot in the upper part of the skull, and blood

welled steadily from a great hole and trickled through his hair and was gathering in a pool about his head.

‘Is he dead?’ murmured Dick. He dropped beside the fallen man and slipped his hand inside the Dago’s shirt. ‘I can’t feel his heart,’ said Dick; ‘and I should say there’s no hope for him.’

‘Is it an accident,’ breathed Jerry, ‘or’——

He paused and did not mention the dreadful alternative. At the next instant the Scouts were gone. A faint rattle among the bushes on the bank of the billabong came to their ears, and they vanished from beside the body and shot into cover. Three, four, five minutes passed and there was no further movement. They recognised that it was a false alarm, some wild creature, perhaps, running through the scrub. The swift tropic darkness was gathering.

‘We’ll work towards the camp,’ said Dick. ‘If it’s an accident they’ll be coming to fetch him in. Anyway, we can’t help him now, so it’s of no use to go back to him.’

CHAPTER XLIX.

BAIL UP!

ONE side of the billabong was lined with scattered clumps of brushwood, and through this they crept towards the camp. Presently they knew by the glow in the air that the fire was not far away; so they crossed the billabong, and Dick very cautiously climbed the opposite bank. As he did so a voice came to his ears. It was that of the half-caste; but Dick could not catch the words spoken. But he heard plainly the reply made in the loud tones of the beach-comber. 'Well, of course,' said Copra Jack, 'it makes only two to whack the stuff instead o' three; an' then, d'ye see how useful his horse 'ull come in? We can shoot the lame un an' pack the stuff on the gray.'

Dick's blood ran cold within him. This speech confirmed his suspicions. The unhappy Dago had been murdered in order that his fellow-scoundrels might obtain his share of the stolen gold and the use of his horse. The beach-comber had enticed him some distance from the camp and shot him down.

Again the half-caste spoke, and this time Dick caught his words: 'Did you bring his things along?'

'Things! What things?' returned the beach-comber. 'Why, he'd only got a shirt an' trousers on him. I didn't want them. We never let him have a pistol again. No; I never touched him.'

'He'd got a knife,' said the half-caste.

'Perhaps so,' said Copra Jack carelessly; 'but who's goin' to bother about a knife?'

'I am,' replied the half-caste; 'about this knife, anyhow. It's one of the best I've ever seen.'

'Go an' get it, then,' returned the beach-comber, 'if ye think such a lot o' it. I'm goin' to sit down a bit.'

He took a saddle, placed it at the foot of a small blood-wood tree near which the fire had been built, and settled himself comfortably upon it. The half-caste turned and went along the bank of the billabong, but without approaching the spot where the Lone Patrol lay in hiding.

Dick now had the camp-fire and the beach-comber in full view. He had crawled over the lip of the bank, and lay behind a stout silver-box tree, which afforded him an excellent cover. Copra Jack was seated at ease upon the saddle, his back against the tree, and his crossed legs stretched before him, his eyes fixed on the fire. He began gently to whistle, and the air was 'Annie Laurie.' Midway of the air he changed whistle for song, and, in a voice which had once been good but was now much thickened by whisky, he sang softly :

'Gi'ed me her promise true,
Which evermore shall be,
An' 'twere not for Annie Laurie
I'd lay me down an' dee.'

There he sat, wicked, old, hardened Copra Jack, seated in his last camp, beside his last fire, his hands, still wet with the Dago's blood, clasped comfortably upon his stomach as he warbled the tender old ditty, a look of cheerful content on his battered visage ; no honest overlander ever sat more at ease after a hard day's journey on a lawful errand.

At this moment Dick glided swiftly forward. In after-days, when he told the story of this attack on the bush-ranger, he always said that he never formed the idea ; it was the idea which seemed to be the master, and forced him to do its bidding. In any case, he moved soundlessly on the careless, singing figure, plucked the empty revolver—the Dago's revolver—from his belt, presented it full at the beach-comber's head, and said in a low, fierce voice, 'Bail up !'

Oh, what a change swept over the bushranger's face ! All the wicked fury that his horrible, flattened features could show blazed up at once ; but with the fury came fear. Yes ; he feared. Time and again Copra Jack had bailed up other people, but never before had he been bailed up himself. It made a frightful difference to be at the wrong end of the revolver, to look straight into the grim circle of the big blue Colt instead of squinting along the barrel ; and the terror he had struck into other hearts now swept in full flood into his own. He threw up his hands.

Dick's followers had backed up his rush at once, and Jerry and the black now shot into the firelight.

'Tie him up,' said Dick, and kept the muzzle full on the beach-comber's head. The latter gasped and started as he recognised his assailants. Never had he dreamed of seeing them in the flesh again. And flesh and blood they were, as he soon knew when Jerry cut a length of cord from a pack, ran a slip-noose round his wrists, and lashed them to the tree, taking a turn of the cord around the slender trunk. Jacky caught up a bridle, slashed open the loops where the reins were made fast to the bit, knotted the reins together, and thus produced a long, stout leathern thong. This was passed round the captive's waist, then round the tree, drawn tight, and the ends strongly knotted together. All the time he was closely covered by the pistol.

'Never mind his feet,' said Dick ; 'he's fast enough.' And so he was. His hands high above his head and lashed to the trunk, his body held firmly to the tree, Copra Jack was helpless in their hands. Jacky dropped on his knees beside the pinioned desperado and ran nimble hands over him. His pistol was in a hip-pocket, and Jerry seized it as Jacky drew it out. Then the blackboy discovered a dozen cartridges and a big knife tucked away in a pocket inside the beach-comber's shirt ; and that proved to be his

stock of weapons, and a very dangerous stock, too, in such unscrupulous hands.

'We've got him,' said Jerry, standing back and looking on their captive with shining eyes, as if he could scarcely believe that this strange thing was true. Then he turned to Dick and handed over the beach-comber's pistol. As he gave it up he came to the salute and stood rigid. So did Jacky. Just that. Not a word spoken. But if ever a patrol was proud of its leader, the Lone Patrol was that night. Dick was a trifle pale, for the strain of this magnificent piece of bluff had been no small thing. He returned the salute; and No. 2, dropping his hand, became his cool, dry self once more.

'Hello, Copra!' said Jerry cheerfully as he turned to the captive. 'I've heard a bit about ye lately, an' seen a trifle o' your games. How do ye like bein' bailed up yourself? An', Copra, *ye've been bailed up with an empty pistol*; it's the one we bagged off the Dago!'

When the beach-comber heard this his fury was tremendous. His eyes glittered and snapped with rage; he opened his mouth intent on a flood of imprecations, but none of his evil words was at his command; he could only gasp and mouth in inarticulate rage. To think he had been bluffed and befooled by a boy with an unloaded revolver! But how was he to guess that? How was he to know that no deadly slip of lead lay hidden in the chambers?

'Watch him, Jacky,' said Dick, and threw open the cylinder of the weapon which Jerry had seized. All six chambers were filled.

'Ah!' said Dick; 'he reloaded after he shot the Dago.'

Copra Jack gave a start. They knew that also!

Suddenly Jacky made a swift spring and swung up his tomahawk, saying in a low, quick voice, 'Mine thinkit him shout!'

Jacky was right. The prisoner had been about to raise a

yell of warning to the half-caste ; but the cry died away on his lips, for as the blackboy leapt forward the latter looked terrible. Jacky's lips were curled back from his white teeth, his eyes gleamed like coals of fire, and now that his blood was up he would have split the beach-comber's skull with savage joy. He saw, too, the danger. The armed half-caste, warned and safely hidden in the darkness, would be a terrible enemy.

'Hold hard, Jacky,' snapped Dick ; and the tomahawk was checked in mid-air, but still hung there threatening, as Jacky watched the captive with fierce and boding eye.

'Don't strike !' gasped the prisoner. 'Don't strike ! I'll be quiet.'

'Jerry,' whispered Dick, 'get something to gag him. We can't hit a chap with his hands tied ; but he can make matters jolly awkward for us if he puts the Buck on the track of things.'

Jerry found an empty tucker-bag, and in a trice the beach-comber was gagged. The tucker-bag was rolled up and forced between his teeth, and tied at the back of his head by its own strings.

Meanwhile Dick had been loading his empty revolver from the spare cartridges, for it was of the same bore as that taken from the beach-comber.

'Here you are, Jerry,' he said, and passed it over ; and the two of them were armed for the final contest, the struggle with the half-caste.

Dick cast a glance over the prisoner's fastenings to be sure he could not slip them.

'He's all right,' said Jerry ; 'except he knows how to twist his feet round to the back o' the trunk an' untie good knots with his toes !'

'Jacky,' said the leader, 'go and watch the horses ; keep them well to the other side of the flat.'

Jacky nodded and shot away to the group of feeding

horses, and the two Scouts slid into the billabong and went swiftly up it. They meant to place themselves upon the track of the half-caste; to await his return from his visit to the spot where the Dago's body lay.

'We're all the better out o' that firelight,' whispered No. 2. 'If the Buck had got back while we were busy wi' Copra we might easily ha' been uncommon sorry for it.'

'Yes,' said Dick; 'he would have potted us easily enough, and we'd never have known where he was shooting from. We'll go another hundred yards or so, and then drop under a bush and wait for him.'

How quiet it was in the camp! The Scouts had been very noiseless in their movements and very soft in their speech; but when they went an odd feeling, a feeling which he did not in the least understand, filled the beach-comber's heart.

It was a sense of desertion, a sense of being left to something infinitely worse than their company, deeply as he hated them. His rage—the boiling fury which possessed him that he, the old, the cunning, the master of a thousand tricks, had been outtricked and outmanœuvred by these boys—cooled and died down, as a fire sinks when water is thrown on it. And whence this chilling feeling came he knew not. But it came, and he strained eyes and ears in hope of seeing the half-caste glide into the circle of firelight.

Suddenly there was a rustling among a patch of reeds on the edge of the billabong. The beach-comber glanced across eagerly. Was it the Buck returning? He could not believe that, for the half-caste would return without a sound. Besides, it was the wrong direction. The clump of reeds stood a dozen yards beyond the silver-box tree and up the billabong, while the Buck and the boys had gone down.

Again the reeds rustled. Something was pushing through them, something which moved slowly, and at last crawled into the light on hands and knees, and lifted a horrible,

blood-stained face and blinked at the bright flames of the leaping fire. The beach-comber stared with starting eyes, and his heart leaped with terrible fear. *It was the Dago.* It was the Dago, and the beach-comber, bound and helpless, watched the dreadful, blood-boltered figure creep up to him inch by inch.

CHAPTER L.

THE LONE PATROL COMES TO ITS OWN AGAIN.

WHEN the Dago had fallen to the treacherous shot of his comrade, Copra Jack had left him to die.

Here the beach-comber had reckoned without taking into account the immense vitality of the tough, wiry little man. He had believed that the Dago was dead. So had Dick. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would never have moved again. The Dago was the hundredth. He had recovered consciousness, pulled himself together, and, in spite of his frightful wound, had scrambled to his feet and staggered from the place. He had a confused idea of making for the camp, and had blundered round in a wide sweep before he saw the shine of the fire. So that when he made for it he came from a direction quite different from that taken by the half-caste and the Scouts.

He was on the other side of the billabong when he saw the blaze, and his strength had been severely taxed to climb the nearer bank. He had managed it on his hands and knees, and after he had crawled over the edge of the bank and had thrust his way through the reeds, he continued his journey in the same manner, from sheer inability to rise to his feet once more. His strength was fast going, the blood welling steadily from his gaping wound ; but he fixed his beady, glittering eyes on the shining fire and dragged himself forward, as if his only wish was to reach it and die beside it.

He gained it and paused. Hitherto he had been crawling in silence ; but now he gave a deep, hollow groan. He slowly raised his head and stared vacantly round. His glance fell on the pinioned bushranger, who was watching him with eyes filled with an awful fear.

The Dago looked and looked, and slowly the idea grew in his dim mind that his enemy was before him. Then a miracle happened. A new tide of life seemed to sweep into the failing body. He bounded to his feet; his hand dropped to his belt, whence his knife had not yet been stolen; he made a leap like a charging panther, and struck one fierce blow. It was the last flicker of his almost exhausted strength. He collapsed and dropped like an empty sack across the beach-comber's drawn-up legs, drawn up as the pinioned man crouched together from that wild assault.

Dick and Jerry had heard the deep, dreadful groan which the Dago had uttered. It came to them through the silence of the night, and filled them with wonder. It could not be their captive; he was gagged. What could it mean? They slipped swiftly back to see. They turned a bend of the billabong and saw the shine of the fire, and they saw, too, a figure ascend the bank and step into the glow. It was the half-caste. He had found the Dago gone, had patiently and steadily worked out his line, and had just arrived too late to avert his vengeance.

The half-caste burst into a low laugh and clapped his hands in exultation. His first thought was that everything was for the best; that now to him would come all, all—horses, gold, everything. He strode forward to assure himself that the tragedy was complete; then he paused. His glittering eyes swept every side of the camp at once, his pistol was in his hand as if it had leapt there, and his whole attitude became full of suspicion and fear. From the distance he had supposed that the Dago had surprised the beach-comber asleep. But the body of the latter hung in bonds which held it to the tree. Whence had those bonds come, and who had secured them?

At the next instant the half-caste was off, running for the horses. There was but one thought in his mind, and that was swift and immediate flight. Crack! crack! Dick fired a

couple of shots after him, aiming high, for Jacky and the horses were somewhere in the darkness beyond. The half-caste ran faster still, for the shots told him these were no warrigals who had beset the camp. But it was Jacky who filled his soul with terror and turned his fear to a blind panic. For the black Scout, seeing the half-caste race towards him, raised the wild, piercing yell of a police-tracker. Dick and Jerry played up to this at once, filling the air with the same cry and firing two or three shots.

The half-caste swung aside, went across the flat at terrific speed, and then a hollow plunge betokened that he had taken a tremendous header into a water-hole on that side and was swimming for his life.

Jerry ran to the point where the half-caste had dived over the bluff and fired a shot across the water, then listened. He came back in a few moments.

'We'll have no more bother with him,' said No. 2. 'I heard him swarm out o' the water an' go full bunk into the scrub. He won't stop runnin' till daylight. There's nothin' like makin' 'em think the police are on the track.'

'My Colonial!' said Dick. 'This is great, Jerry; it looks as if we'd got things going our way again.'

'It does,' replied the corporal; 'but there's somethin' pretty queer been goin' on by that fire, I fancy.'

'We'll look into it,' said Dick; and they went quickly to the fire.

A glance told them what had occurred.

'My word!' murmured Jerry. 'The Dago scrambled back to the camp, after all, and found Copra tied up.'

'Yes,' said Dick in a low voice; 'we'd tied him up like a bullock for slaughter. It's a frightful touch in one way. But how were we to dream of what was going to happen?'

He drew his knife and cut the bonds which held the beach-comber's body. It rolled to the ground, and the two who had slain each other were lying in one confused heap.

The Scouts had just made sure that the bushrangers were quite dead as Jacky came up with the horses. Whitesock whinnied with joy when his master spoke to him, and thrust his velvet muzzle against Dick's cheek as the patrol-leader patted and caressed his favourite, now won back from the rough hands which had seized him; and Dandy and Jerry met with equal satisfaction.

'Get the swag together,' said Dick. 'We'll shift camp down-stream for the night.'

Within an hour they had a fresh fire going and a new camp pitched below the little bluff, and Jerry was mixing a damper and brewing tea in a billy. The tea, above all, was delicious. It would be hard to say how much they drank; but the pannikins were filled again and again.

Then they slept, two at a time, while the third kept watch. It was practically certain they had nothing to fear, for the half-caste would hasten to put many a mile between him and his foes before daylight should reveal his track; but Dick was all for prudence and being on the safe side, and a careful watch was kept. And here we may say that the Lone Patrol never again saw or heard of the half-caste. Nor did the police ever come across him. Without doubt he fled into the interior and hid himself among some wild desert tribe.

The night passed quietly, and 'nerangi daylight' found them astir. As soon as the day broke, the first thing Dick did was to examine the lame horse. He soon found what was wrong. There could not have been a horse-master among the bushrangers or the poor beast would have been seen to before. A big thorn had entered the pastern and broken off short. It was extracted and the place bathed, and the animal at once began to move more easily.

After breakfast the whole of the baggage was packed on Whitesock, Dandy, and Gray Girl, and the lame nag followed unladen. The patrol marched to the spot where the beach-

comber and the Dago were lying, and turned the horses out to graze on the flat, while they dug a grave in the sandy soil beneath the bloodwood tree. Here they buried the two men who had died together in so strange and tragic a fashion. Then the line of march back to the clay-pan where Sam and his mate had been left was taken at once.

An hour before dark they rode down from a little ridge into the clay-pan, and saw the two men stretched beside the tiny water-hole. Jerry 'Coo-eed !' and the gold-diggers sprang to their feet and raced towards the Scouts. The rest, the water, and the food which had been left with them had put them right again, and they raised a great shout of delight when they saw that Dick and his comrades had recaptured the whole outfit.

'Don't say you've got everythin' back, Dick?' roared Sam. 'It can't be true!'

'It's all right, Sam,' said Dick. 'We've got the lot, yours and ours, complete.'

'An' what o' that gang?' cried Joe.

'Broken up,' replied Dick. 'They'll never bail up anybody again.'

'No; the bailin' up was on our side this time,' cried Jerry; and he burst into the story of Dick's great bluff and how things had ended.

'Good riddance!' said Sam when he heard of the deaths of the beach-comber and the Dago; 'the more that sort wipes out each other the better for honest folks.'

It was a merry party which camped in the dreary clay-pan that night and discussed future plans. The Lone Patrol intended to set off at dawn and make once more for Lignum Flat, while Sam and Joe, with their recovered treasure, would resume their journey. Sam promised to go straight to Narana and see Mrs Barry and tell her all the news, and assure her that Dick and his father would soon be home.

The next morning they separated. Sam's horse was much

better and could manage its load at a gentle pace, and the diggers meant to make easy stages. Before the Kangaroos left camp, Sam came forward with a heavy tucker-bag and laid it before them.

'There ye are,' he said; 'there's fifteen solid pound o' gold in that bag, nuggets an' dust. An' little enough, considerin' what you've done for us!'

'My word, Sam!' said Jerry; 'that bag's worth gettin' on for a thousand sovereigns, at that rate.'

'It's little enough,' said Sam again.

'Thank you very much for the offer, Sam,' said Dick; 'but we can't take a pinch of it, and we don't want to take it either.'

'Why not?' said Sam bluntly.

'We're Boy Scouts,' replied Dick, 'and we're bound to lend a hand when required without being paid for it.'

'Yes,' said Jerry; 'it's dead agin' the rules. Take your gold away again, Sam.'

The diggers protested; but the Kangaroos were firm, and would take nothing but thanks for the great service they had rendered to the two mates.

There was no happier patrol in the world that morning than the Kangaroos as they cantered up the track towards the camp they had left in so forlorn a condition. They had their horses back; their outfit back, down to the old shotgun; and the tucker-bag with its precious contents was once more stored at the bottom of the billy.

They made the camp about two hours before sundown, and started a fresh fire on top of the heap of ashes which guarded their secret so surely. On the road Dick had shot a brush-turkey in a patch of big timber, a fine young hen, and Jerry turned out a supper to make a hungry man's mouth water.

CHAPTER LI.

AT LIGNUM FLAT.

NEXT day they pushed steadily ahead and covered a big lot of ground. Late in the afternoon they came to a low 'leopard-wood' ridge, and as they breasted it their quick ears caught sounds in the distance, sounds which caused them to drive their horses sharply at the slope, for they knew that the end of their long journey was at hand.

They gained the crown of the ridge and saw Lignum Flat, a dry, waterless expanse, where scores of men were busily at work, digging and 'dry-blowing' for gold. The plain was littered with gunyahs and shacks of all sorts, shapes, and sizes; and as the Scouts drew near they saw that the surface was pegged out into claims, and in each claim parties of from two to four or five men were working with all their might.

'Hello!' said Jerry; 'that's Jim M'Lean over there!'

'Where?' said Dick eagerly; and Jerry pointed out a man at work on the extreme edge of the Flat. They rode across at once, and Jim, raising his eyes at the rattle of hoofs, hailed them with open eyes and mouth.

'You boys!' he cried. 'How on earth did you get up here?'

'Followed your trail, Jim,' said Dick.

'And what have you come for?'

'To see how you're getting along,' returned Dick. 'Where's father?'

'Lying down in the shack,' said M'Lean, and nodded to a little bark-hut standing at one corner of the claim.

Dick sprang from the saddle, threw the reins to Jacky,

ran across, and lifted the sheet of bark which served as a door. Mr Barry was lying on a heap of dried brush, and glanced up as Dick stepped in. His surprise was great on seeing his son, and for some moments he could not speak. Dick was shocked to see how weak and ill his father looked.

‘I say, father, you’ve had a dreadful time of it!’ he cried.

‘Do I look as bad as that, Dick?’ said the invalid, grasping his son’s hand. ‘Why, I’m a king to what I was. I ought to be out and at work; but Jim wouldn’t hear of it, and drove me into the shack about two hours ago. Said I’d done enough for one day.’

‘And so you had,’ said M’Lean, coming in with Jerry. ‘Half a day’s “dry-blowing” is quite enough for you at present, Barry. I’ve knocked off myself now, for I want to hear all the news.’

Half-an-hour’s busy question and answer put both sides in possession of all the news; and then Dick said, ‘How are things going here?’

‘As far as we’re concerned, uncommonly bad,’ replied M’Lean. ‘We’ve had no luck at all. It isn’t because there’s no gold. The chaps in the next claim got over forty ounces yesterday, and we’re only getting a “colour” now and then.’

‘Let alone you’ve been handicapped with a sick mate, Jim,’ said Mr Barry.

‘That wouldn’t prevent us hitting on a “pocket,” if there was one to hit,’ chuckled M’Lean.

‘Then you’d have no objection to shift if you could do better elsewhere?’ asked Dick.

There was something in his tone which caused the two diggers to look earnestly at him; and Dick laughed, and answered the question in their eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘we’ve struck something; but whether there’s much or little I can’t say. I’ll fetch the billy along.’

‘I’ll fetch it,’ said Jerry, and dived out at the door.

While he was gone Dick told the story of finding the gold, and his father nodded.

'Many and many a place has been hit on in some such fashion,' he said; and M'Lean added, 'Many a one.'

In came Jerry with the billy, and the tucker-bag was soon unfolded and its contents turned out on a sheet of bark.

Mr Barry whistled. 'Why, Dick,' he said, 'you boys have knocked out at a stroke more than Jim and I have done on two diggings.'

'The luck's been frightful,' murmured M'Lean as he ran his fingers through the nuggets which Dick and Jerry had found in the black snake's hole; 'but this is all right,' he went on. 'There may be a heap more there.'

'Or the boys may have had the lot,' said Mr Barry quietly.

'No, father,' said Dick; 'there's more where that came from. I saw the gold shining in the sand. But of course I can't say how much.'

'Well, Jim,' said Mr Barry, glancing at his mate, 'is it good enough to start for, or d'ye feel inclined to stick to the claim here?'

'My word!' said Jim M'Lean, 'it's good enough for me if the boys will let me in.'

'Let you in, Jim?' cried Dick. 'What sort of talk is that? Of course; we'll all peg in at it, and share and share alike.'

'Then I'm on,' said M'Lean. 'I'm dead sick and tired of this "dry-blowing" job. I'll dig and wash as long as ye like; but I'm fed up wi' this business.'

'There's plenty o' water to wash with, Jim,' said Jerry; 'a big water-hole right handy.'

Jim M'Lean slapped his leg. 'Then off we go quiet and easy as soon as the chaps are asleep,' he said; and Mr Barry nodded assent.

'I suppose we should be followed if we started in the daylight?' said Dick.

‘Certain to be, Dick,’ replied his father. ‘All the diggers who are having no luck keep a wide eye open for men moving away. They think those fellows have heard of a new rush, and they’re after ’em like a black-fellow after a “sugar-bag.”’

‘And they’ll have hold of the right end of the stick this time,’ remarked Jim M’Lean; ‘so we’ve got to be extry careful. Best for you boys not to ramble about too much and draw notice. I’ll get our horses up from the creek and run the things together quietly.’

The arrival of the boys had attracted little attention, for the ‘dry-blowers’ were too busy seeking for gold to cast a glance aside; but, for all that, Jim’s advice was good, and the Scouts kept pretty closely to the shack until darkness should settle down. From its shelter Dick watched the process of ‘dry-blowing,’ a method he had never seen before.

‘Dry-blowing’ for gold is only practised where it is impossible to obtain water, for washing the gold from the dirt is a much more easy and pleasant task. On Lignum Flat the nearest water was two miles away, and was much too scarce and precious to use for washing out the gold. So each digger took a few spadefuls at a time of the soil in which the gold lay, or in which he hoped it would lie, and spread the earth out flat. Then he beat it with a heavy wooden club until all the hard lumps had been pounded into dust. This he picked over, throwing aside the stones and gathering the nuggets, if nuggets turned up, until he had only the dust left.

Next he went to work with two tin dishes. In one he placed the pounded earth and held it above his head; the other was placed on the ground. Slowly and carefully the earth was poured from the upper dish to the lower. As it fell the dust and light rubbish flew away in clouds on the wind, while the stones and the heavy particles of gold fell to the dish beneath. This process was repeated until only a small amount of dust was

left, and the dish was now shaken from side to side until a compact little heap gathered in the centre, with the gold at the bottom of the heap. The dish was held up to the mouth, and a sharp puff of breath spread the heap over the dish, leaving the gold shining just under the nose of the 'dry-blower.'

Now when gold did shine in the pan this was an ample reward for the worker; but when he had pounded his dirt and winnowed it all day in a blinding, scorching, roasting glare of sun, his eyes smarting and his throat choked with clouds of dust, swarms of flies tormenting him ceaselessly, a single pannikin of muddy water for a day's supply to quench his burning thirst, and then no gold in the pan, things became a trifle short of gay. So it was no wonder that the unsuccessful diggers leapt at the chance which the Lone Patrol offered them.

Late that night the Scouts and their friends moved cautiously from Lignum Flat, thanking their lucky stars that the shack was at the very edge of the diggings. Hitherto this had been a piece of ill-luck for the diggers, and had been owing to the fact that Mr Barry's weakness had caused them to arrive last on the field, after the more promising claims had been pegged out. Now it was altogether in their favour.

The Lone Patrol had slept a few hours and had made a good supper; their horses had been well watered, if scantily fed, and the diggers' horses were fresh; so that good progress was made.

'The nags will soon be all right when we get back to the water-hole,' said Dick, stroking Whitesock's neck. 'There's good grass all round it, and they can have a good spell there.'

CHAPTER LII.

DICK'S NUGGET.

THEY travelled all night, Dick picking up the trail easily by the light of the moon ; halted for an hour at dawn to boil a billy of tea ; then pushed on again, and reached the water-hole and the ring of black ashes by midday. Mr Barry stood the journey well, for his old nag, Saltbush, was as easy a mover under the saddle as ever stepped.

'Now we can go to work,' cried Jerry. 'Good old fire ! Nobody's touched the ashes. They've hidden Dick's goldmine in great style.'

Dick was as eager as his mate to see what lay under the blackened patch, and as soon as they had unsaddled White-sock and Dandy, hobbled them, and turned them out to graze, the two Scouts set to work forthwith. In the diggers' outfit were a pick and shovel, and the boys seized these and began their search for gold, while M'Lean and Jacky pitched camp.

Their elders laughed to see the enthusiasm of the young diggers. 'Go it, my hearties !' chuckled M'Lean. 'Pitch in and knock out a fortune before the billy boils !'

There is many a true word spoken in jest, and so it proved on this occasion. Jerry with a few sweeps of the shovel cleared away the ring of ashes and bared the sandy soil. Dick swung up the pick and made the dirt fly right and left. He did not strike into the loose ground where they had already dug, but a little to the right of it. He had not fetched more than half-a-dozen blows or gone in more than a few inches when the pick brought up against something with a jerk which nearly wrenched it from his hands.

'Hit on a stone!' cried Jerry. 'Get the point under an lever it up.'

'It didn't feel just like a stone,' said Dick, though at the moment he did not dream of what it was. But he took Jerry's advice, drove the point in beside the obstacle, threw his weight on the handle, and slowly heaved a large, round object out of the earth.

He was about to push it aside with his foot, when he heard a loud, gasping cry of astonishment. It was from the lips of M'Lean, and Dick was surprised to see cool, quiet old Jim jump forward like a madman, pounce on the big, round lump, and swing it up with a roar of triumph.

'By all the powers!' he shouted, 'if Dick hasn't made my words good. Boys, this is a nugget!—Look at this, Barry! Look at this!'

'Is it gold?' asked Dick, unable to believe his own eyes.

'Yes, my lad,' said Mr Barry. 'You've struck it rich this time.'

'Is it gold?' cried Jim M'Lean. 'Catch hold of it, Dick. Feel the weight! That'll let ye know in short order what it is.'

Dick seized the lump, and was astonished at its immense weight for its size. Jerry took it in turn, and let out a war-whoop and danced round with it, but not with his usual light, nimble step.

Jim M'Lean caught it from him again and swung it up in front of Dick's face.

'There you are,' he said; 'it's nearly the size of Dick's own head. Not a bad nugget for a new hand to start with.—Mates,' he cried, and looked round on the others, 'we'll call this "Dick's Nugget," and it shall be his very own, independent of what else may turn up.'

'Right, Jim,' sang out Jerry; 'that's "Dick's Nugget," an' he can put it in his pocket right away.'

'No, no,' protested Dick; 'share and share alike.'

'So we will from this out,' cried Jim. 'Whatever we get we'll make a pile of it and divide up. But this is yours, Dick, if we don't get another pinch. You found the place and you turned it out, and don't you say another word, for it's settled.'

Dick stared, entranced, at the splendid lump of gold.

'How far would it go to stocking Ballamoola, Jim?' he asked.

'Stock it easy,' replied M'Lean; 'that lump of gold is worth thousands and thousands of pounds. I reckon it runs anywhere from sixty to seventy pounds weight, and you reckon sixty sovereigns, say, to a pound weight of gold, and you won't be far out.'

'Give me that pick!' roared Jerry. 'My turn next. I'm goin' to put pedigree stock all along our creek.'

Dick laughed and handed over the pick, and Jerry went to work like a Trojan, and sure enough, from close under the spot where the big nugget had lain, Jerry turned out one the size of an egg and three or four smaller specimens.

'Hold hard, boys!' called out Mr Barry; 'the billy boils. We'll get some tucker now. The gold won't run away.'

They made a merry meal beside the water-hole, chatting over chances, and the boys wondering if there were more 'pockets' about the place.

'We'll see about that pretty soon,' said Jim M'Lean. 'You two boys can go on getting out a good heap of dirt ready for me to wash, and we'll have a look round and see if there are "signs" anywhere else.'

When the meal was over Dick turned to Jacky. 'Look here, Jacky,' he said; 'you roll yourself up and tumble off to sleep at once. You'll have to watch this camp to-night.'

Mr Barry laughed. 'Don't mean anybody to lift your nugget, eh, Dick?' he remarked.

'Not a bit of it, father,' replied Dick. 'It seems to me

this is a country where you've got to keep an eye wide open. At any rate, we've found it so.'

'You're quite right, Dick,' said M'Lean. 'There were two or three baskets of bad eggs about Lignum Flat; though the worst lot, by a long chalk, went when you broke up that Copra Jack push. They're not real diggers those fellows. The genuine digger is as straight as a gun-barrel; but beach-combers and that sort of riff-raff are bad company anywhere.'

Jacky promptly did as he was bid. He scratched a hole in the sand in shade of a bush, rolled himself into it, and was asleep in two-twos; the others went to work.

First Dick and Jerry made a large hand-tray on which to carry the dirt to the water-side. They cut a sheet of tough bark, lashed a couple of poles to it, and when the sheet was piled high with 'wash-dirt' they carried it between them to the bank of the water-hole. While they worked the two men tried spot after spot which looked likely to yield a 'pocket.'

At last Mr Barry and M'Lean came back. 'I fancy you've got the place here, boys,' said the former. 'We'll peg out a good big claim all round it and work it well. Better stick to a paying place than lose time searching, and perhaps get something worse in the end.'

Jim M'Lean whistled. He had gone over to the heap of dirt and was running his fingers through it.

'My word!' he cried. 'This is the dead-finish, this is. Why, the dirt's full of gold.'

So it was. As the soil ran through his fingers, it showed a hundred glittering points as if the earth had been sown with seeds of the precious yellow metal.

'We haven't come across a single nugget,' said Dick.

'Don't worry,' replied Jim; 'I'll show you something pretty in the bottom of a pan before long.'

He took one of his 'dry-blowing' pans and half-filled it

with the earth. Dick and Jerry left their work and ran to see him wash. At Jim's request, Dick filled a billy with water and poured some into the pan. A dexterous swirl or two, and Jim poured away a muddy stream. More water, and away went more mud. This process was repeated several times, and then M'Lean drained off the water, held out the pan, and said, 'There you are!'

The boys looked, and saw a tiny heap of gold at the side of the pan; it was composed of fine dust and two or three small slugs.

'How much is that, Jim?' said Dick.

'A full ounce,' replied M'Lean, and Mr Barry nodded assent.

'A good ounce there,' said the latter, and went to fetch a second pan to help M'Lean in washing.

For the rest of the day the boys dug and carried dirt and the men washed, and by night they had filled a tucker-bag full to the brim, and Jerry had picked up nearly a score of nuggets as Dick turned them out with a pick. These nuggets were all small, the biggest perhaps the size of a walnut; but they all told up, and the total amounted to a wonderful day's work.

The next morning the boys were at work in the hole, which was now some seven feet deep, when the soil suddenly changed; the pick was driven into a tough clay.

They reported the change, and Mr Barry came across and looked into it.

'Don't go any deeper,' he said. 'You've bottomed the "pay-dirt." Work round the sides.'

It was clear now that the claim was not deep. But it was as rich as ever as they cut down the sides of the hole, and there was enough gold in sight to mean a very substantial sum.

That night, or rather the next morning about an hour before the dawn, Dick was awakened by Jacky softly pressing his arm. He threw his blanket aside and was up in a

moment. Jacky slept by day and watched by night, and now he had heard something.

'Mine thinkit somebody come,' whispered Jacky.

'Who is it, Jacky? Black-fellow?'

'No, no,' replied Jacky. 'White-fellow. Noisy fellow. Walk about. I hear him long way off.'

Dick joined the blackboy, and they crept noiselessly away from the sleeping camp. Dick saw no need to awaken the rest at present; there could be no great danger in this noisy approach.

Dick lay down and put his ear to the ground. He caught the trample of feet at once; but the men were far off, and coming down the trail from Lignum Flat.

The dawn was just breaking when the new-comers approached the water-hole. There were five of them, and they hid themselves in a reed-bed and watched the camp. Dick chuckled. He had been watching them for some time, and the idea that they thought themselves unseen and were prying on the camp amused the young bushman.

Presently Jerry sat up and yawned tremendously.

'Visitors,' said Dick.

'What? Where?' snapped No. 2.

'There's a bunch of five Chinkies hidden in the reeds watching with all their eyes to see what we're up to.'

'Chinkies!' ejaculated Jerry. 'Well, if they ain't master-hands at smellin' out a track to a new rush. When did they come down the trail?'

'About an hour back.'

It was a couple of hours later, and work was in full swing, before the five watching Chinamen crept out of the reed-bed. They crept out on the other side, made for the trail, and then came drifting along it as if they had casually happened on the place. All this gave much amusement to Dick and Jerry, who had kept an eye on the movements of the pig-tailed Celestials in their loose blue clothing.

The Chinamen eyed the diggers very cautiously lest they should be run off the ground at the point of the pistol, for in many a mining-camp they are not at all beloved. But our friends were not of that sort, and pretty soon the Chinkies were at work in a claim which they pegged out as near to 'Dick's Find' as they dared to come.

How does the news of gold spread? So magical is its attraction when once found that it seems as if the birds of the air must carry word of it.

Only one whole day had the finders worked alone. Now here were five Chinamen, and before night a dozen white men came down the track and went to work forthwith. In two days more half Lignum Flat had arrived, and the place was a new rush, and Dick and his friends were working in the midst of a crowd. Of the new claims worked two or three were very good, and almost everybody made his wages; but 'Dick's Find' easily held the lead until the fifth day, and then it dropped dead. For two hours Mr Barry and Jim M'Lean washed and never a 'colour' showed. They examined the hole carefully, and both came to the same conclusion.

'She's done,' said Jim; 'the "pocket" is worked right out.'

'Yes,' said his mate; 'this claim's finished.'

'No need for us to be down in the mouth either,' murmured M'Lean. 'We'll weigh up and see where we stand.'

They went across to the bark humpy which Jacky had put up single-handed while the others worked, and where that member of the Lone Patrol was now peacefully asleep, guarding the treasure-chest. The latter was a hole in the floor, covered by a sheet of bark, and when Jacky spread his blanket over bark and hole and went to sleep thereon, there was no fear that any marauder would get his fingers into the tucker-bags and two leathern wallets which held their store of gold.

Dick lifted the sheet of bark which formed the door and stepped in. As he did so Jacky's glittering eyes opened, and remained fixed on his young master's face, as if wondering what Dick wanted there in work hours.

'Up with you, Jacky,' said Dick, and the blackboy bounded to his feet. The blanket was drawn aside and spread out to receive the bags and wallets which Dick lifted from the hole.

Among Jim M'Lean's swag was a small spring balance, pulling up to ten pounds, and with this the weighing was done, a small bag being hung to the hook below the spring. Jim carried out his task carefully, and they found that, what with dust, slugs, good shotty gold, and nuggets, they had turned out one hundred and seventy-one pounds twelve ounces of the real stuff, without reckoning Dick's nugget.

'That's good enough,' said Jim M'Lean; 'there's well over ten thousand pounds sterling to share up among us.'

'Bar me,' said Dick quietly; 'that is, if you insist on my keeping the big nugget. If you'll throw that in, we'll strike the whole lot into shares all round. Otherwise I stand out.'

'No, no,' cried Jerry and Jim together. 'The nugget's yours, Dick; that's settled.'

'All right, then; I'll stand out of this division,' said Dick. And his determination could not be shaken.

Jerry had been staring thoughtfully at the heap of gold they had won, and now began to whistle softly the air of 'Home Sweet Home.'

'That's the tune, Jerry, my son,' laughed Jim M'Lean, slapping the whistler on the knee. 'We'll make a break that way with "nerangi daylight" in the morning.'

At dawn they broke camp and saddled up their horses, packing the precious gold in bags among their swag, and

taking the greatest care that these parcels, at any rate, were well secured.

The diggers gave them a great cheer as they set off, for many of the men were doing very well; and those who were departing were the finders of the field.

At the head of the little column rode Dick and his father. Mr Barry was already another man. The finding of the gold seemed to have given a wonderful fillip to his health. Reduced to a low state by the severe fever, he had been further weighed down by the run of ill-luck which Jim and he had encountered at the two fields where they had worked almost in vain. But in this case third time had paid for all, and they were returning with an ample sum of money to make good the severe losses which the great drought had caused.

'And you say there's plenty of grass at Ballamoola, Dick?' he said.

'Any amount, father,' replied Dick. 'It's up to your knees all over the Big Flat.'

Mr Barry drew a long breath of immense relief. 'Then we'll soon restock and have things running in first-rate order,' he remarked.

'An' so say all of us,' cried Jerry from the rear; and Jim M'Lean laughed.

The track was level and the horses were fresh and in good condition from the feed on the grassy flats along the creek. Whitesock was tugging at his bit, and Dick gave him his head and let him swing into a canter. This started the rest, and they went a couple of miles at a lively bat before they were checked by the steep ridge over which the Scouts had seen the bushrangers disappear on the very horses which were carrying them now. This brought memories of their desperate plight at that moment and their fortunate condition now. A strong, well-armed, well-mounted party, they need fear no one, and Dick's heart beat happily as he

thought of how he was returning with his father and a fortune. He looked round and caught the unfailing grin on Jerry's cheerful face.

'Things have panned out all right, Jerry,' he said.

'No mistake,' returned No. 2. 'We've been in some queer fixes; but takin' it by an' large, as sailors say, there's nothin' much to beat the luck o' the Lone Patrol.'

THE END.

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